The Origins of The Colombia project – TCP Global

The Colombia Project has its roots in Peace Corps and Rotary. The eight-member team includes six Returned Peace Corps Volunteers who served in Colombia, Guatemala, Slovakia and Bolivia, three Rotarians and three native born Colombians. For the first fourteen years, we operated under the umbrella of Returned Peace Corps Volunteers or South Florida as The Colombia Project. At the end of 2014, we evolved to TCP Global, replicating our Colombia success in other countries.
This all started shortly after I completed my second stint in Peace Corps, where I had carefully observed the good, bad and ugly of the non-profit sector in Slovakia. Richard Good, who had served with me in Colombia in the late 60’s met me in Miami to explain his vision of providing help for displaced people in Colombia. At that time, Colombia had one of the highest murder, kidnap and internal displacement rates in the world. Richard’s idea was that we would provide resources to displaced people who were ready to start rebuilding their lives.

My two years in Slovakia trained me well for this new challenge. In Slovakia I served on the Small Projects Administration grants committee, reviewing requests from fellow Peace Corps Volunteers for grants of up to $10,000 available through U.S. AID. I also had the chance to observe the thriving non-profit sector in Eastern Europe where I noticed that some organizations were quite skilled at giving workshops, printing nice brochures, attending international conferences and securing funding while other non-profits were busy actually helping people improve their lives. These effective non-profits were typically off the radar of the funding entities.

It was this experience that led us to create The Colombia Project as a results-oriented program focused on delivering resources to the effective grassroots organizations that were actually making a difference in people’s lives. We would provide nothing up front for good intentions but would reward our partners well for good results. Prior to Peace Corps Slovakia, I probably would not have been able to explain the difference between a grant and a loan. My service in Slovakia
was a fruitful training ground for me and provided the expertise to create a sustainable Colombia Project micro-loan program.

A friend of Richard’s had started a nonprofit called ADESCOP to help families that were displaced to the Bogota area. Many such organizations were appearing but ADESCOP was the only one with the word peace in its name and apparently the only one looking for solely peaceful solutions to the displacement crisis. Frustration had risen to the point that even the International Red Cross office in Bogota was attacked and many international non-profits were leaving because of the violence.

Just after the turn of the century, each time I visited Bogota, I met families who had recently lost a loved one – a son, husband, daughter, or father. Walking through the streets near Richard’s home in the Candelaria sector of Bogota, he would point out locations where a kidnap or murder had occurred. Violence was the new normal.

In April of 2000, Richard and I met with leaders of the displaced community, social workers and lawyers to discuss what we could do to help displaced Colombians. At a round table discussion in Bogota, the consensus was that the best way we could help from afar would be to provide resources to help those who were ready to rebuild their lives. Although they had left their businesses and homes and tools of trade behind, they still had their expertise and their energy. They just needed a helping hand to get back on their feet.

Importance of RPCVSF Support
Returned Peace Corps Volunteers of South Florida (RPCVSF) agreed to provide oversight, 501c3 and banking services. The Colombia Project functioned as a committee of RPCVSF until the end of 2013, which provided the credibility that helped us attract and keep donors. Because RPCVSF provided 501c3 status, banking and mail services we were able to focus on building the program. The Colombia Project simply did not have the resources to complete the requirements and paperwork for tax-exempt status and qualifying for a bank account while simultaneously doing the work of helping people. It is doubtful that even friends and family would have been eager to donate to a new organization like The Colombia Project had it not been backed by RPCVSF with its twenty-four year track record.

In 2003, RPCVSF received the Loret Miller Ruppe Award from the National Peace Corps Association for The Colombia Project. This recognition within the Returned Peace Corps Volunteer community gave a boost of confidence and aided in fund raising as well.

Soacha

With the support of RPCVSF, we began working with displaced communities in Colombia. Richard's friend Yomar, a journalist who established ADESCOP to assist displaced families in the Bogota area, had received asylum in the U.S. after being threatened. His wife remained in Bogota and joined our efforts and introduced us to the new ADESCOP leaders who took us to visit displaced settlements in Soacha and Ciudad Kennedy. I was struck by the optimism and resourcefulness of the people I met, particularly in Soacha. They had hewn steps
out of the dirt in the steep hills of Soacha. Raw sewage ran down the hill alongside the steps in some areas, while in others the sewage had already been contained. Garden hoses crisscrossed the hillside, bringing water to hovels that had been constructed from whatever spare wood and metal that could be found.

We visited a room that was used as a school, with well-worn chairs and tables and some ABC’s on the wall. Someone from Soacha conducted the classes, for which the parents paid a small amount. In theory, the Colombian government provided free education for all the children and uniforms were optional. In reality, children with no uniforms were immediately pegged as different and therefore undesirable but the real problem was that the children of Soacha were assigned to a school across the city. Bogota is a huge metropolis of over eight million. Even if they had the bus fare, no child from rural Colombia could be expected to make the trek across Bogota twice a day to attend school. While a few of the children could be accommodated in the makeshift school, the quality of education was inferior. Others received no education at all. Not only had these families lost everything they had worked for, their children were also losing their futures. In many of the Soacha homes there were four or more children to clothe, feed and educate. While big families might have been an asset in an agricultural zone, it was a challenge to sustain a large family in Soacha.

I had just recently returned from two years in Slovakia with the Peace Corps. Although communism had been expelled from the country, the mentality still lingered in the population, which was slowly learning to take initiative instead of waiting for direction from the government. A feeling of oppression was still in the
air. I was struck by the stark difference in the people I saw in Soacha. They were cheerful and optimistic. I saw initiative everywhere from the improvement projects they had completed in the hillside, to the mother of four who did laundry by hand to earn money to send her children to school.

While the people of Soacha were highly motivated to make the most of their situation, the truth was that they needed significant government assistance to meet their basic needs. They were not quite at the stage to rebuild their lives. We also quickly realized that the ADESCOP leadership was barely one step ahead of the people they were trying to help. There was conflict in the displaced communities between those who had been displaced by guerillas and those who had been displaced by paramilitaries. There were threats and soon the leaders who had replaced Yomar also fled, this time to Canada for asylum. It was clear that we needed to work through grassroots partners that were well established and able to offer support to the micro-loan recipients. None of the funds lent out in Soacha and Ciudad Kennedy was repaid, so we had to raise additional funds and find a new partner if The Colombia Project was to continue.

New Funds and New Partners

The Coral Gables Congregational Church (CGCC) and ODRI in Popayan, Colombia came to the rescue. The Church gave us $3,000 as seed money to prove our concept. At about the same time, we had a presentation from a non-profit from Popayan that wanted to do micro-loans. The Popayan presentation referenced the need for sustainable change, for an end to the annual grants that produced nothing more than a new round of grant requests. Thanks to the
Church donation, we had the funds we needed to make a commitment to the Popayan program.

Over the next three years we supported loan programs in Popayan and Santa Marta, each with an established non-profit that provided various types of support for the micro-loan recipients. A representative of U.S. AID said that ODRI in Popayan provided the best marketing training in rural Latin America. At the time it was still too dangerous to travel in this part of Colombia, but through the RPCV network, we were able to find people who could verify the work being done in Popayan.

FUNDEHUMAC was introduced to The Colombia Project by an RPCV couple that spent part of the year in Santa Marta and administered an education program through FUNDEHUMAC. Both ODRI in Popayan and FUNDEHUMAC in Santa Marta brought in professionals from the community to support the borrowers. They provided trainings and mentoring and a far more stable support structure than ADESCOP could offer in Soacha.

Evolution of the TCP model

The Colombia Project model changed significantly over the first seven years. Initially, in the ADESCOP period, there was a KIVA-style structure that allowed donors to select specific borrowers to support. We soon had partial funding for a lot of loans but complete funding for none. By the time a loan application was posted online and then funded, with the funds then transferred to Colombia, the applicant had often moved or developed a new business plan. We quickly
realized that we needed to send the funds upfront to our partner in Colombia so that loans could be approved and awarded in a timely fashion.

Although the loan program was created to serve displaced families, this policy tended to sharpen divisions within communities and increase resentment from impoverished people who saw newly arrived residents receiving special treatment. If we were to help the displaced people integrate into the local community, we needed to avoid any policies that created dissension and division. Although we transitioned from targeting displaced communities to targeting marginalized communities, displaced people continue to be a significant part of the TCP Global program, including indigenous Guatemalans who were displaced by war and Malian refugees who relocated to Niger.

Our model originally provided for the partner to keep 50% of all repayments, a structure that prevented the buildup of a permanent loan pool. We changed that policy to allow the partner to keep 50% of the amount of funds sent from the U.S. Repayments on loans supported by the permanent/revolving loan pool would be returned 100% to the revolving loan pool. This meant we would gradually build a permanent loan pool while also providing funds for community projects.

In the early days we made funding decisions rather blindly based on reports provided by the grassroots partners. Their reports, however, were limited to activity on open loans. They did not show us the history, or tell us how much of their funds were sitting idle, or tell us how often they recycled their loan funds or provide any delinquency data. The new reporting process developed in 2007 allowed The Colombia Project team to set clear criteria for release of new funds:
all previous funds must have been invested at least twice, the cash on hand must be less than $500 and the maximum delinquency rate was 5%.

It seemed logical at first to prohibit loans to family members, but once we started to work in small communities where everyone was related, that policy fell by the wayside. When the religious order removed its nuns from O, the actual loan recipients took over management of the loan program, something we never envisioned at the outset. Since they were unpaid volunteers, it would be unconscionable to deny them access to the loans they were working so hard to provide to fellow citizens of O. I think back to when I admonished Alba Lucia in Santa Marta that her daughter could not receive a small business loan. I would probably handle that differently now, although adjustments should be made to the loan application process when there are family members involved.

Funding

In the early days, our funding requirements were small. With only one partner over the first three years (first Soacha and then Popayan), we never needed more than $3,000 in one year. The $3,000 grant from Coral Gables Congregational Church was critical as was the support of Friends of Colombia, the alumni group of Returned Peace Corps Volunteers who had served in Colombia. The organization made annual donations to The Colombia Project and then TCP Global and more importantly, they provided us a direct channel through their newsletter and webpage to their members, all of whom were committed to helping Colombia. This provided a reliable core group of donors. And just as Colombia Project mentors serve as cheerleaders to energize loan administrators,
members of Friends of Colombia encouraged and motivated our team during challenging times. They also provided our third partner (FUNDEHUMAC in Santa Marta) as well as a model for a fundraising brunch that provided significant funding for six years.

2006

By 2006 our programs in Popayan and Santa Marta were doing well. We had a request to replicate in Cartagena a program supported by ASHOKA in nearby Barranquilla, but were short on funds to support that program. Beyond that, we saw limited possibilities for expanding the program in Colombia. For several years we had reached out to MINICOL, a Colombian ex-pat non-profit registered in both the United States and Colombia to provide financial and mentoring support to ensure a good education for children from impoverished communities. MINICOL had more than ten sites in Colombia and seemed like a good potential partner, but each time we approached MINICOL, we were told our loans were too small and the work entailed too great.

In early 2006, my daughter Ashley reconnected with Nora, who had been her best friend in sixth grade. Nora’s parents were both from Colombia so Ashley told Nora all about The Colombia Project micro-loan program. In April of 2006, when Ashley died in a car accident, Nora offered condolences and also invited me to lunch to learn more about The Colombia Project.

Over the next few weeks the Returned Peace Corps Volunteer community, as well as other friends and family searched for ways to be supportive and bring
something positive from this tragedy. Condolences cards were frequently accompanied by donations in Ashley’s memory to The Colombia Project. I remember reading in The Year of Magical Thinking about Joan Didion’s conflicted reaction to any material gains she received as a result of her husband’s death. Each check that arrived in Ashley’s name brought me a similar dose of guilt along with gratitude. It’s hard to feel good about something rooted in tragedy. Eventually more than $4,000 arrived in memory of Ashley and I always think of the Cartagena program as Ashley’s program.

A few weeks later when Nora took me to lunch, I learned that both of her parents were on the MINICOL board. Ashley danced through life like a bubble of sunshine, warming the lives of everyone she met including Nora’s parents. They listened carefully to what Nora related and came to our next Colombia Project board meeting, joined our board and eventually helped introduce The Colombia Project to nine MINICOL sites. They also invited us to participate in annual conferences for MINICOL administrators in Colombia, providing a cost-effective way for The Colombia Project to bring its administrators together with free lodging in the convent in VM where Nora’s aunt was stationed as a nun. The MINICOL programs would surely not have materialized without the outpouring of support that accompanied Ashley’s death. Over the next eleven years, the MINICOL partnership produced excellent loan administrators who achieved a level of success that attracted multiple donors as well as new partners. Nothing can ever make up for the loss of Ashley, but like all who lose a loved one, I am comforted by knowing that something good also came out of this tragedy.