



Success Story: *EducaFuturo* and Farmer-to-Farmer Empower Ngäbe Women to Increase Cocoa Production and Income in Panama

Background

As the saying goes, two is better than one. This was Partners of the Americas' (Partners) approach when they enlisted two of their programs to help Panama's Ngäbe women create value-added cocoa products.

There are approximately five to six million cocoa farmers worldwide and more than 20 million people whose livelihoods directly depend on cocoa. Unlike industrialized crops, 80-90 percent of cocoa comes from small, family-run farms with under five hectares of land. In Panama, indigenous Ngäbe women in the Changuinola District of the Bocas del Toro province have been producing cocoa for years.

Partners' Approach

In 2013, Partners initiated the *EducaFuturo* program in Panama, funded by the United States Department of Labor, to reduce child labor by providing Ngäbe women income-generating opportunities through vocational training and small business support. For the women, adding value to their cocoa would increase the diversity of products they sell and provide them with an opportunity to create a sustainable source of income.

However, inadequate access to market information and cocoa producers purchasing inputs individually, rather than leveraging the power of group buying, limited the Ngäbe women's profits. The women also lacked information on cocoa quality requirements and marketing strategies to increase demand for their products.

To address these barriers, Partners' Farmer-to-Farmer (F2F) program, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), stepped in. In March 2015, F2F volunteer Rebecca Roebber traveled to Panama and trained the Ngäbe women in marketing and methods to improve production quality of their cocoa products. Roebber demonstrated how to make value-added and finished chocolate products by adding ingredients like salt, cinnamon, fried plantain, vanilla and coconut. The Ngäbe women designed a label with a cocoa tree that included their story on the back. Roebber also conducted workshops on the benefits of working as a cooperative.



“ *The women ... decided to organize themselves into a group. They were skeptical of working with one another at first but ended up finding a real sense of community over the course of the training. Not only are they united and proud of the products they produce, but they are also carrying on the traditional practice of making chocolate.* **”**

– Rebecca Roebber, Farmer-to-Farmer volunteer

In October 2015, F2F volunteer Arcelia Gallardo, a chocolate maker with years of experience in global bean-to-bar production, expanded on Roebber’s work. She trained the Ngäbe women in new recipes and how to calculate profit margins for chocolate caramel and caramel popcorn with nibs. Together, the Ngäbe women and Gallardo found a local store interested in selling their local chocolate to tourists. They remade their logo, improved their packaging, created labels and brochures, and started a Facebook page¹.



Impact

As a result of Partners’ *EducaFuturo* and F2F programs, the Ngäbe women more than doubled their earnings from the previous year. The women also continue to meet at least once almost every month to work together to overcome the obstacles of small-scale chocolate production.



“ *It is a process that moves slowly step by step, but these women are resilient and I know they are going to keep moving forward.* – Oscar Muñoz, *EducaFuturo* Panama Field officer **”**

While challenges still remain — such as developing a permanent production space and maintaining their processing equipment – the joint effort of *EducaFuturo* and F2F demonstrates Partners’ collective impact on increasing agricultural production and economic development, as well as reducing child labor.

“It was a great honor to have been able to work with the Ngäbe women and learn about their culture,” said Muñoz. “I look forward to seeing their progress and to maybe one day seeing their products at the International Chocolate Salons around the world.”

¹ <http://www.facebook.com/NobaBalenChocolatesPanama>