



Success Story: Partnerships for Economic Growth and Entrepreneurship in Colombia

Background

Colombia is ranked as an international leader in entrepreneurship in Latin America, with high potential for innovation, job creation, and growth. However, unemployment and income inequality remain high. Unemployment rates averaged 11.8 percent between 2001 and 2015, and Colombia's Gini coefficient (a statistical measure of inequality of income or wealth) of 0.54 suggests the country has one of the highest rates of inequality in Latin America. Low food production, internal displacement due to conflict, and poverty also continue to threaten food security.

These facts inspired Colombian brothers, Gabriel and Felipe Mayr, to co-found Zen Naturals a small Colombian eco-cosmetic company that makes all-natural cosmetics from local plants such as aloe vera and quinoa, in 2013. Zen Naturals supports local communities by purchasing products directly from farmers, offering trainings on improved agricultural practices, and providing sustainable local jobs and fair wages, particularly for single mothers.

Partners Approach

In April 2015, Gabriel was selected to participate in Partners of the Americas' (Partners) Bavaria Entrepreneurship Exchange program, where he traveled to Washington, D.C. to meet with experts in investment and small business development. Gabriel also met with specialists from the cosmetics industry to learn about their business processes and necessary steps to enter the U.S. consumer market. During his trip, Gabriel realized his products still required some quality improvements in order to be competitive in the international market. He also realized he needed a deeper understanding of the export market before he could make his business international. Partners offered support via its USAID-funded Farmer-to-Farmer (F2F) program.



In July of 2015, F2F volunteer Bruce Akers, who has over 20 years' experience in cosmetic chemistry and product development with eco-friendly companies, traveled to Colombia to work with Zen Naturals. Bruce analyzed Zen Naturals' manufacturing processes and trained 20 employees on methods to improve product quality. He evaluated their compliance with global product standards and reworked their product formulas to meet international standards. Akers also put Gabriel in touch with Whole Foods and assisted the two in creating a long-term product development plan that equipped Zen Naturals with the tools to create high-quality products for export. "With Bruce, many good things happened. He started changing things up," Gabriel said.

In November 2015, a second F2F volunteer, Margaret Woodward, traveled to Colombia and helped Zen Naturals develop an international marketing strategy and social media plan. She conducted market research on U.S. cosmetics and used this information to ensure Zen Naturals' marketing strategy matched that of the U.S. Woodward worked to make Zen Naturals products more appealing to a U.S. market, by updating the company's website and improving their product label to emphasize their organic status.

Impact

Thanks to the help of the F2F volunteers, Zen Naturals gained B Corp certification – given to companies committed to using business as a force for good – and a PETA-approved vegan certification. The company also achieved Whole Foods quality standards. In August 2016, Zen Naturals will officially hit the U.S. market, with products for sale at select Whole Foods in Ohio, Maryland, Virginia, Kentucky, and Washington, D.C.



“ *The greatest thing about having a [F2F] volunteer is that it's a completely new world of knowledge that comes to your company, things that you might never have had the opportunity to achieve before. You have people who have completely different backgrounds giving you new ideas and new tips for your business.* – Gabriel Maya ”

By gaining certifications and achieving the Whole Foods quality standards, new clients have become interested in purchasing Zen Naturals' products, and at a higher price. By February 2016, Zen Naturals' sales increased by 320 percent compared to the previous year. Their staff size also increased by 45 percent, offering more jobs to local community members.



“ *Our company started as a dream of social entrepreneurs to integrate beauty with social causes... It's amazing what you achieve with Farmer-to-Farmer.* – Gabriel Maya ”

Inspired by President Kennedy and founded in 1964 under the Alliance for Progress, Partners of the Americas is a 501(c) 3 non-profit, non-partisan organization with international offices in Washington, DC. www.partners.net