

## RIDING THE WATER CIRCUIT

*Third year Peace Corps Volunteers support rural water systems*

by Tim Wellman

In Panama, third-year Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) are helping rural water committees improve the operation, maintenance and management of community water systems by using tools and activities geared towards rural and indigenous populations. This pilot project, modeled after the National Rural Water Association's (NRWA) Circuit Rider Program, uses the knowledge and skills the PCVs acquire through training and first-hand experience during their first two years of service under the Environmental Health Program (EHP).

The project focuses on working with community water committees to identify deficiencies in their water system and create plans to improve the systems' reliability or management methods. Once the deficiencies are identified, third-year PCVs, with the technical and financial assistance

from Waterlines, a U.S. based NGO, travel to rural water systems to work with the committee members on the identified deficiencies. The goal of the pilot project is to provide timely, consistent and specific assistance and training to rural water committees, thus allowing PCV and committee members to be effective in increasing consistent access to potable water supply for rural Panamanians.

### THE CHALLENGES OF AN EFFECTIVE WATER SYSTEM

Panama has an abundance of water; it receives in the range of 70 to 100 inches of rainfall a year depending on the geographic location. With such an abundance of rain, communities can tap a variety of sources for water supply. With outside assistance, they can purchase pipes to convey the water to the community, and in some instances,

hire an engineer to design a system that will distribute the water to homes. But, the rain also causes landslides and washouts, which destroy or uncover intake works and distribution networks, exposing them to the elements and breakage every year.

In addition to these small-scale natural disasters, humans also place a challenge for many rural water system managers. Rural water committees struggle to collect user fees, maintain operation and maintenance or rehabilitate and repair the breakages and disruptions. Community politics and conflicts provide challenges for water committee members to fulfill their responsibilities and manage the water system.

While the Panamanian Ministry of Health and other aid organizations invest time and resources in rehabilitation, general operation and maintenance to keep the potable water flowing, these investments seldom see a return, and community water committees rarely experience a period of consistent service that allows for the development of community capacity to sustain the system. The infrastructure and community committee that manages the system is caught in a dysfunctional feedback loop where the faster the system deteriorates, the more dysfunctional the committee becomes and ultimately, the more houses that are left out of potable water service.

### PEACE CORPS' CIRCUIT RIDERS

EHP PCVs see this challenge first-hand as many are placed in communities to try to counteract this problem. When given sets of water system improvement tools and practical experience in implementing these tools, PCVs become quite adept at



PCV and Waterlines Circuit Rider, Meredith Butternon works with a community water committee to visualize their water system.

providing basic assistance to rural water committees and can counteract the negative feedback loop of depreciation and dysfunction.

In addition, PCV's cultural adaptation and understanding of non-formal education techniques allow them to easily engage water committee members, dive into the issues they confront by building trust and a working relationship. Working side by side with water committee members, PCVs provide various services including, completing supply and demand surveys, vertical profiles and plan maps of the system, hydraulic models, and operation and maintenance guidelines. All of which when discussed during water committee management seminars, allow the PCV and committee members to discuss real issues with the system and guide them in devising strategies for dealing with the issues.

Once a PCV has gained the practical knowledge, skills and cultural awareness to work with water committees, they become a fundamental asset to the EHP and other communities in the region. Many PCVs, by their second year of service, understand the issues water committees confront and are able to work with more communities. By extending their work for a third year as a circuit rider, they are able to assist even more systems.

We are in the second year of this pilot project and are already seeing the benefits of consistent visits and implementation of work plans. Water committees are building their own capacity working with these PCVs and gaining the knowledge, skills, enthusiasm and pride necessary to manage their potable water resources. In addition, third-year PCVs continue to gain valuable experience in managing potable water resources. The kind of experience the world needs based on the growing demand for potable water.

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