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Students Unite to Combat Extreme Poverty

By Rob Bartlett

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Ticos are justifiably proud of their country's reputation as one of the most prosperous and advanced in the region, with the strong growth and falling unemployment of recent years indicative of the healthy economy.

Despite these advances, approximately 17% of the country lives in poverty, surviving on less than \$104 per person per month. An estimated 3.3% lives in extreme poverty, defined as surviving on less than \$48 per person per month in urban areas or \$42 in rural areas, according to last year's National Statistics and Census Institute (INEC) Household Survey (TT, Nov. 9, 2007).

To combat such poverty, a group of Costa Rican students is setting out to help those on the bottom rung of the country's economic ladder.

Founded in Chile in 1997 and run exclusively by young people age 18 to 27, *Un Techo para mi País* (A Roof for My Country) is a nonprofit volunteer organization that seeks to help the underprivileged throughout Latin America.

Un Techo para mi País (UTPMP) operates in 12 countries throughout the region and has provided emergency accommodation for more than 32,000 families to date. Volunteers have helped provide relief to those affected by natural disasters, such as the recent floods in Tabasco and Chiapas in Mexico, and the organization has received awards from the Inter-American Development Bank and MTV, among others.

In 2006, UTPMP arrived in Costa Rica to spread its vision of "a Latin America without extreme poverty, where no family has the need for minimum housing and everyone has the possibility to improve their quality of life."

"We go out and look for the families that are most in need, the families that other people and institutions just don't reach," said María Jesús Jaquieh, 23, UTPMP's social director in Costa Rica. "We go out to places where no one else goes."

Despite having been established here just two years ago, the organization's achievements in the country to date are impressive.

"Right now we can call upon 350 students for our construction projects and campaigns," Jaquieh said. "In total there are 750 volunteers who have participated in an event or construction project for UTPMP here in Costa Rica."

"We have built 75 emergency houses so far," Jaquieh added, referring to projects in



Photo courtesy of Un Techo para mi País

impoverished areas of Alajuelita and Desamparados, south of San José, and Cartago and Curridabat to the east.

Building "viviendas de emergencia" is the first stage in the organizations' three-step process for helping those in extreme poverty. The single-story wooden constructions, prefabricated in Chile, measure 18 square meters and are covered by a zinc roof.

"We do not call them 'casas' because they are not really houses at all," Jaquieh said. "It is more of a shelter, so we call them 'viviendas de emergencia.' They are basic, very basic."

A team of six to eight volunteers can construct one such dwelling over a weekend, at a cost of approximately \$1,500, she added.

The group is realistic about the impact these projects have.

"We are aware that the construction of emergency dwellings is only a temporary solution," Jaquieh said. "Yes, they make a difference, but they are not in themselves the solution. There are other aspects to poverty. It is just a testimony to these families' desperate need for shelter."

For this reason, building shelters is not the

end of the story. The shelters are just the first step in a three-stage process that ensures that the group's work constitutes truly sustainable development, according to Jaquieh.

"The second area we work in is social development," she said. "We look to work and further the skills that every person has, doing basic training courses in things like carpentry, and also help to teach the children, depending on the needs of the community."

While she acknowledged that the organization has not yet gotten going with this second stage in Costa Rica, Jaquieh hopes to move forward with it in the coming year.

"It depends on how many volunteers we get, the resources that we have, but it will be the next step," she said.

The third and final stage is to build "viviendas definitivas," or permanent housing.

"We are hoping that by forging links with the government, construction firms and other public and private entities we can work together to provide a permanent solution for these families," Jaquieh said.

Jaquieh emphasized that the work is a joint effort – it's not just young people hand-

ling out assistance to those in need in a one-way relationship.

"I think that over and above the simple construction of the vivienda itself, a real link is established between the young people and the family for whom they are building," she said. "We try to ensure that there is physical interaction in all aspects of the building, like eating lunch with the family and talking with them."

The idea is that in the end the volunteers benefit as much as those they are trying to help.

"We don't speak of 'beneficiaries,' as it is really a joint effort, the result of teamwork, with the family and the volunteers working together on equal terms," Jaquieh said. ■

Busy Builders:
Un Techo para mi País volunteers construct an emergency shelter in the impoverished neighborhood of Los Diques in Cartago, east of San José.

Next Up

Un Techo para mi País is planning to build a total of 48 dwellings from May 1 to 4 and from May 16 to 18 in the Caribbean-slope town of Guápiles. For information, to volunteer or to donate to UTPMP, e-mail info@untechoparamipais.or.cr, call 2234-6471 or visit www.untechoparamipais.org.