



COSSAO: In Search of Community Transformation

Presented by



"This our great project: to achieve the transformation of our community so that it can become self-sufficient," that is how Francisco "Tito" Valentín summarizes the mission of COSSAO, the Corporation of Primary Health Services and Socioeconomic Development of Otoa.

This transformation covers the health, education, and socioeconomic development of seven communities in Utuado, Ciales, and Jayuya. All of COSSAO's main initiatives are interwoven and, now, the thread that connects them is agricultural support.

The Link Between Agriculture and Health

Valentín claims that "health and agriculture go together." Therefore, one of their key projects, in partnership with the University of Puerto Rico-Utuado, is COSSAO's Healthy Box which provides farmers with a distribution channel for their products and access to nourishing foods for the most vulnerable members of the community. "This week, we bought crops from 15 farmers," he comments, brimming with enthusiasm.

The Healthy Box is also helping create jobs in the area, and Valentín has his eyes set on the future as the organization hopes to create a laboratory to produce value-added products with some of the crops they are acquiring.

"I believe that the community kitchen we are building will be able to provide different services. While it supports efforts to provide food for the elderly in the community, it could serve as a laboratory to develop the food products to be distributed and as a place that contributes to the area's economic development," he says. The project is also helping revitalize abandoned structures like the old Hacienda Rullán, which is now functioning as a collection center and production site for the Healthy Box.

The New Generation

Valentín is betting on the younger generation. "The new generation is the one that will truly create change." That is why COSSAO is working on a project to teach basic agricultural concepts to middle school children at the Escuela Antonio Tulla school. Through this project, students experiment with seed trays and lettuce planting in vertical farming systems, among others. "They will not all be interested in becoming farmers or growers, but I hope some of them will be interested in self-management and entrepreneurship," he states. Valentín sees self-management as the future of the area since it could generate economic activity that would entice young people to stay as well as attract new residents with the promise of work and a future. "COSSAO is an organization that has taught all of us about the resiliency and importance of promoting empowered communities. At Triple-S Foundation, we are very proud to support the members of this organization because many of their initiatives strongly resonate with our mission of supporting access to nourishing foods through local agricultural development," expressed Ivelisse M. Fernández, executive director of Triple-S Foundation.

Health Care is a Priority

Taking care of the community's health continues to be essential. The COSSAO health clinic tends to the needs of the residents in the area for free, and its community health promoter groups (that visit the residents of the above-mentioned seven communities) have achieved a complete census of community residents, their conditions, and health concerns. This enables them to respond quickly in the event of an emergency, which was well demonstrated in the aftermath of Hurricane María.

COSSAO is an organization comprised of down-to-earth visionaries with the clear purpose of achieving a model community where everyone is welcome.