

# La Esperanza de Los Calabazos

**This is the story of Doña Esperanza, a peasant woman who dared to seek a better life for her community. Located in the mountains of Jarabacoa, in the province of La Vega, Dominican Republic, her community had no electricity and poor health conditions.**

The community had seen tourist groups pass through daily that participated in, and enjoyed rafting on the nearby Northern Yaque River - one of the major rivers of the country. An innate leader, persistent, passionate, and with little formal education, Doña Esperanza showed a natural understanding and aptitude for business dealings. The idea came to Doña Esperanza and the women of the Calabazos community to provide various services to the tourist groups that would enable the women to earn a few pesos. This is how their adventure as a small community business began, with a small restaurant made out of sticks and cane where, between all of the women, they cooked breakfast for those village visitors. In this way, Doña Esperanza brought “hope” to a hidden spot in the Dominican foothills.



and renewable energy source. They have also had four biodigestors installed that treat wastewater from the entire community and minimize pollution into the river. They cultivate their own agricultural goods which are later served to the guests who have had the fortune of finding this secret paradise.

The women of Calabazos have the clear intention to move forward, to improve the quality of their products, and make their initiative a sustainable and profitable community enterprise.

The Jarabacoa Ecotourism Cluster, in support of the Sonido del Yaque project, requested of the USAID/DSTA program a technical evaluation of the site and from there, to define a plan of cooperation to improve the product and marketing to directly benefit the community.

The Association of Mothers, with the technical support of the USAID/DSTA, conducted the first market survey that allowed them to understand the needs and expectations of tourists. This led them to understand what exact improvements and adjustments should be made to the project. The DSTA program has committed USD \$60,000 to be invested in Sonido del Yaque to improve access to the project, as well as develop a marketing plan that will allow for a full-time job and achieve quality and food safety standards that will satisfy the expectations of local and foreign visitors.

This new process will be completed in about eleven months – enough time for Doña Esperanza to think of new challenges and to create new opportunities for sustainable development in one small corner of the Dominican Republic.



Now in her fifties, Doña Esperanza proudly tells of the steps that she and a group of women from the Calabazos community began to take in the late 1990s when they created the Association of Mothers. The mission of the group was to seek ways to ensure a better future for their children and grandchildren. Realizing the possibilities of her business idea, Doña Esperanza succeeded in gaining the support of a Canadian organization

that quickly helped them build five cabins. Today, these five cabins, along with the restaurant, form the ecolodge “Sonido del Yaque.”

The Sonido del Yaque project is an example of the will and perseverance of women like Doña Esperanza who have hope for a better future. In 2000, the Association of Mothers had a hydroelectric facility installed in the community. By utilizing the plentiful water resources of the area, 39 families within the community benefitted from a local