

Leaders convene to mix power, resources

Hundreds of Latin American mayors attended seminars on how to govern more effectively on the first day of an international conference in downtown Miami.

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San Francisco de Milagro, Ecuador

A crowd of dozens pressed close, pushing cards and projects into his hands. Groups posed and cameras flashed. The supplications flowed, rapid-fire and overlapping.

“I need to tell you about a project we have in the north of Chile. . . .”

“We have an initiative in Colombia that needs funding to continue its work. . . .”

“Are you going to cut aid to Nicaragua?”

Adolfo Franco, the assistant administrator in charge of Latin American and Caribbean Affairs at the U.S. Agency for International Development, gently pushed past the eager throng Tuesday.

“I have no illusions that it's about me,” he said. “It's all about resources.”

This is what it means to be one of the top officials for USAID, which controls purse strings for foreign aid, at a Miami conference for Latin American mayors hungry for progress.

Franco opened the 12th Inter-American Conference of Mayors on Tuesday with a keynote speech that -- like many of the conference events -- focused on the need to get more power and resources into the hands of the attendees.

"The mayors here today know that the greatest opportunity for improving the living conditions of people in your countries is at the municipal level," Franco said to hundreds of mayors from across the region. "It is here where the demands for quality education facilities, health clinics, access to safe and drinkable water, and farm-to-market roads can best be addressed, and ultimately fortify the will, capacity and determination of the people."

Few in the audience at the Radisson Hotel in downtown Miami needed to be convinced of decentralization's virtues. Arturo Espinoza, mayor of the Peruvian town of Patilca, said local governments are given authority and responsibility, but not the necessary resources to enforce them. "The political class doesn't want to give us those things because it means losing power, and that is one of the biggest obstacles to development in our countries."

The conference highlighted decentralization projects in action, including an environmental management initiative in Nicaragua and a "civic audit" project in Argentina that promotes community participation in local governments.

"Being here allows us to see what is going on in other communities, and to see how they have overcome the problems we share," said Jose Francisco Asan Wonsang, mayor of the Ecuadorean city of San Francisco de Milagro.

Hundreds of mayors, state council officials and representatives from nongovernmental organizations were expected at the conference, which runs through Thursday.

Today's events include seminars on citizens' roles in promoting change and technology to promote development.

The conference, in its 10th year in Miami, is sponsored by Miami-Dade County and is organized by Florida International University's Institute for Public Management and Community Service.