

Colombia

prepared remarks from USAID/LAC/SA, Steven E. Hendrix

EU-US Drug Dialogue - Feb 3, 2022

WebEx discussion organized by INL with ONDCP and EU counterparts

Colombia is one of the few countries globally where the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) works that has both institutional will and capacity. That makes it an outstanding partner for the U.S. However, today Colombia is confronting a complex set of development issues.

Colombia is trying to implement a historic but very costly peace accord. It is doing that even as the country is witnessing record levels of coca cultivation. About 95 percent of that coca is being grown across the focus geography of the Peace Accords. That, in turn, is fueling violence and criminality across rural Colombia, including threats and homicides against human rights defenders, environmental activists, and social leaders, and an increase of massacres, confinement, forced displacement, and youth recruitment into organized crime.

Beyond that, Colombia also has over 1.7 million Venezuelan migrants plus over 500,000 Colombian returnees who have returned from Venezuela, fleeing the regime. These returnees oftentimes walk for days to and through Colombia for food, basic services, health care, and a better life.

The pandemic overlays this. The healthcare system is strained both by the pandemic and the influx of migrants. On top of this, there is a widening gap between the rich and poor. This further heightens the tension between the state and society. As a result, over the past year, Colombia has seen widespread social protest and social unrest.

The pandemic has worked well for crime. Throughout the pandemic, Colombia has had one of the most restrictive quarantine regimes of any worldwide. And yet, illegal armed groups did not stop their operations. Not only did they continue, but they actually exploited the lockdowns to exert greater territorial control and access over coca networks and illegal mining, and ultimately, in the process, terrorize communities.

In sum, this is a pretty difficult moment for Colombia. With all of its will, and with all of its capacity, Colombia is trying to address all these issues simultaneously. And it is doing this at a time with a lame-duck government awaiting May 2022 first-round presidential elections.

Duque Administration and Commitment to the Peace Accords

Peace accord implementation in the government is supervised by Emilio Archila, the Presidential Advisor for stabilization and legality. His main goal over the past two years has been to implement as much of the accord to ensure that the process is irreversible. In other words, no matter who is elected in the May 2022 presidential election, the peace accords will

continue with implementation. There is already a constitutional mandate to do this for the next two additional Colombian presidential administrations. But the Duque administration is doing what it can.

Having said that, the pace of the implementation is uneven. On the positive side, in 2021, the transitional justice system launched heavy-hitting cases against both the former guerillas and the military, holding all sides accountable for what happened during the conflict.

Territorial development plans (PDETs) are also moving forward at a good pace. There is a lot of political will and interest in the integrated rural development and land reform parts of the peace accord. These are certainly complex and difficult, but the Colombian administration is pushing hard. Already 170 municipalities across sixteen regions have them in place across the zone of the peace accord plus a few priority regions outside that original target geography. Colombia is ramping up its efforts to try to implement. USAID has 22 programs, and \$125 million going into implementing those plans as well.

On the other hand, reintegration is moving slowly. For rural Colombians, it is not a satisfying pace. For the international community, donors also want to see the accords implemented and see Colombia turn the page from conflict to peace. Is that anxiety realistic? The University of Notre Dame's Kroc Institute's 2001 assessment on the implementation of the peace accord at the five-year mark shows Colombia about on track compared with the implementation of similar arrangements in other countries. The Kroc Institute advises that peace accords are often made or broken within their first five years. The Colombian government is trying to do that and assure its implementation is irreversible. USAID stands to support that goal.

USAID programs

The peace accord and its implementation are elevated as a higher priority now than during the previous U.S. administration. Human Rights remains a priority emphasized on the first call between U.S. Secretary of State Blinken, and Colombian President Duque. For Colombia, USAID has a \$220 million annual portfolio that responds to the challenges of the Peace Accords, the migration crisis, the pandemic, and organized crime. Specifically, USAID is helping Colombia transition from over fifty years of violent conflict toward an inclusive and sustainable peace. USAID is trying to socially and economically integrate Venezuelan migrants and Colombian returnees. And USAID is responding to the urgent health crisis and the longer-term economic and social impacts of the pandemic.

For the most part, USAID's geographic focus is defined by the Peace Accords. These are isolated rural parts of the country—the poor, conflict-affected parts of Colombia. This represents about 30 percent of the country's territory and about 15 percent of the population. Beyond this geographic focus, USAID also engages with the cities where people have migrated in search of economic opportunities, or due to forced displacement.

Within that geographic framework, USAID works across three primary pillars. The first one is to expand the presence and improve the performance of state institutions, building their capacity at

the national level, the state level, the municipal level, and helping them to fill this space that's been traditionally occupied by the former guerillas, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—Ejército del Pueblo*, FARC–EP or FARC). That work includes issues like fiscal decentralization and resource mobilization, good governance, anti-corruption, and improving public investment so that it more directly meets the needs of citizens in these underserved and traditionally forgotten parts of the country,

USAID works with the full range of criminal justice sector actors to help improve citizen security on the one hand, and on the other hand, to expand access to justice into these isolated parts of the country. USAID is helping Colombia to connect community justice systems that have been evolving over fifty years of the conflict.

Human rights remains a major concern. Colombia has seen a rise in violence against human rights defenders and social leaders. USAID works with the ombudsman and civil society organizations to try to prevent violence against those groups. USAID works with Colombia's Ministry of Interior's National Protection Unit to help protect those who have been threatened. USAID also works with the prosecutors' office (*fiscalía*) to investigate human rights-related crimes. This is a particular challenge since a half-century of conflict left behind nine million victims.

Victims assistance is not surprisingly a large part of USAID's portfolio. USAID works with victims themselves via the Victims Unit, as well as through state and municipal governments to try to help ensure that citizens (especially victims) can exercise their rights under the law, including financial compensation (*reparación*) and land restitution, and truth-telling and psychosocial support. Additionally, USAID has been supporting certain chapters of the peace accord related to the comprehensive system of "Truth, Justice, and No Repetition." That includes the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (*La Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición*) of the transitional justice system (*Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz*, JEP) and the unit for search of disappeared persons. The USAID assistance helps Colombians to move forward, reconcile and turn the page on decades of violence. The system also establishes consequences for the transgressions committed on all sides during the state's conflict with the FARC.

During the war, the FARC previously controlled many environmentally sensitive parts of the country. The FARC used these areas for criminal activity. USAID now works with the Colombian government to expand state presence into these important parts of the country. In doing so, USAID helps Colombia to improve its natural resource management in those locations.

Tracking violence in rural Colombia is not exclusively a USAID initiative. USAID works hand-in-hand with the U.S. Embassy political section, and with the state apparatus and civil society organizations, many of whom are out there tracking violence across rural Colombia. USAID helped to create a human rights observatory, managed by the police, looking at these challenges and trying to better identify the perpetrators of these crimes.

Over the past two years - during the pandemic - violence across rural Colombia has changed. Nationwide statistics may look promising in terms of homicides which are now at some of the lowest levels from the past four decades. However, USAID's target geographic areas are vastly different, for example, with a jump in massacres, forced displacements, reported forced recruitment, and anecdotally, stories of confinement and community mining. USAID's partner liaison security officer coordinates daily, both USAID field partners reporting what they see, and the police to make sure that when USAID programs witness violence or are being threatened the police are tracking, monitoring, responding, and managing it effectively.

Violence began to rise before the COVID-19 quarantine. When the pandemic hit, it got worse. The government had to reorient much of its security apparatus along the border. That meant less of a presence in some of the communities where USAID works. While there is an increase in violence against human rights defenders, the government is responding with different approaches, actually supported by USAID. For example, traditionally, the National Protection Unit was focused on individual measures of protection. USAID has been working with the unit, at the request of civil society organizations and social leaders themselves, to kind of get away from that approach. Instead, the new focus is on collective protection measures, coordinated with civil society organizations. As a result, the government is effectively putting more financial resources into collective protection measures. Having said that, in terms of the individual protection measures, the unit still protects 4000 social leaders.

There is a lot of capacity when the government and communities themselves join together to increase protection. Unfortunately, it is a complicated scenario with multiple criminal groups who are competing for territorial control, and oftentimes, human rights defenders and social leaders get caught in the middle.

Those criminal groups are diverse, some are very much related to the drug industry, designated as major transnational criminal organizations. Some of those criminal elements are on designated terrorist lists. There are multiple FARC dissident groups. There are also the so-called "criminal bands" (Spanish "*bandas criminales*" – "*BACRIM*"). In certain parts of the country there are also young, brutish gang members trying to control certain parts of the country, oftentimes in urban areas. So organized crime in Colombia is a mixed bag. At its core, certainly, to a large extent, is competition for both the coca networks and the illegal gold mining networks.

For statistics, USAID uses UN official data along with data from local organizations including the Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement (*La Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento: CODHES*), among other local organizations, to track the ebb and flow of abuses. USAID also engages closely with organizations based both in Colombia and Washington, including Human Rights Watch. USAID itself is launching a new program tracking different indices of violence, and the nature of violence in different regions. This should give USAID a better understanding of that context and allow USAID to modify programs to better respond to concerns. It will also help USAID to train its staff on safety situational awareness.

In 2021, 78 human rights defenders were killed in Colombia, according to the United Nations Human Rights office, with additional possible cases yet to be verified. That report noted that violence against human rights defenders, environmentalists, and community activists, known collectively in Colombia as social leaders, has become a big challenge for President Ivan Duque's government amid international criticism and demands that it do more to stop the killings.

The second pillar that we work on is building stronger and more resilient communities that can better withstand the pressures of criminal groups. Organized crime competes to fill the power vacuum left behind by the FARC. For fifty years, individuals and communities have suffered - and in many cases continue to suffer - unimaginable levels of violence. The collective psychology of these communities is deeply affected. So USAID looks at building (or rebuilding) the social fabric, trying to strengthen social cohesion, bringing the different factions together, to reconcile and move beyond past atrocities. Part of this is working with citizens and civil society organizations to help them channel their demands and their interest directly to the government.

Youth remain a major demographic of USAID's work in this sector, not only in the isolated rural parts of the country but also in the major cities. On the one hand, USAID works to prevent youth from being recruited into both domestic and transnational criminal groups. On the other hand, for youth already in conflict with the law, USAID works to demobilize child soldiers, helping them get the rehabilitative services that they need. This includes psychosocial counseling, employability consultations, self-esteem, leadership, all kinds of things to help these vulnerable youth to reintegrate back into their communities and become productive members of society.

USAID's third pillar is connecting these isolated, rural parts of the country, to commercial markets. Illicit markets already have robust linkages for coca and illegal gold mining. Colombia has the potential to produce legal, high-quality products at high volume if Colombians have the know-how and connections to the buyers. As a result, USAID is working intensively in agricultural value chains like cacao, coffee, tropical fruits, rubber, and dairy.

USAID also works on physical connections. Tertiary roads are critical to sparking growth in rural Colombia. And they often are correlated with positive outcomes. In parts of rural Colombia, where there are good tertiary roads, there are state and private sectors. Where there are no good tertiary roads, more often than not, there is coca and violence.

Land was at the core of Colombia's conflict. Consequently, land tenure has to be central to solving the historic conflict. Here, USAID works in two areas. First, where land was taken away, USAID helps the government with land restitution - making sure the land goes back to its rightful owner. Second, USAID is also assisting the Colombian government with land titling. This opens the door for rural Colombians to credit opportunities to invest in their land. Titling is also directly correlated to coca production. Post eradication, if a farmer does not have title to his property, the replanting rate (recidivism) for coca is over 75 percent. However, where they do have a title, recidivism is under 25 percent.

USAID also engages with multiple financial service institutions. USAID has mobilized \$1.1 billion in financial services for rural Colombians. This helps lift farmers out of poverty. It gives them opportunities other than coca. It supports hundreds of thousands of micro-enterprises and entrepreneurs.

Renewable energy, primarily solar and wind, represents some of the best opportunities. They not only create clean energy jobs across rural Colombia but also help power rural schools, clinics and homes. All this further ignites local economies in areas critical for the success of the Peace Accords.

New Approach on Counter-Narcotics

In terms of the counter-narcotics approach, there's been a move away from looking specifically at "hectares eradicated" as a measure for success. Instead, both the Colombians and the U.S. are trying to find better metrics and better ways that we can measure the sustainable reduction of coca cultivation. A General Accounting Office (GAO) report on Colombia notes that this will require a holistic approach. A subsequent RAND Corp report called for much more focus on integrated rural development to integrate public security, counternarcotics efforts, and economic development. It also tracks with the Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission (WHDP) bipartisan report from December 2020 (Juan Gonzalez, now National Security Council [NSC] Director for the Western Hemisphere, and his predecessor Dan Restrepo were co-authors). That approach was endorsed by a High-Level Dialogue between Washington and Bogota in October 2021. Interestingly, the approach is also consistent with the Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities between the U.S. and Mexico.

Embracing this new thinking, progress no longer starts with eradication. Opportunities could begin with offers from the state, swapping the growing of coca for public goods and services. Land titles are great for this. It is a way that can result in stimulating lesser levels of violence. If somebody agrees to those plans, and then later fails to comply, that is the point that you start bringing in the forced eradication. So both Colombia and the U.S. have adjusted the approach to counter-narcotics.

USAID is fully integrated with larger U.S. government programs with the State Department International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Bureau (INL), the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), and the U.S. Department of Justice, coordinated at the Washington level by the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP). Together, these agencies are piloting this whole-of-government approach in three target municipalities across the country. Today, coca production remains at an all-time high, with documented increases of nearly 15 percent over 2019 totals. COVID-19 has significantly reduced the Colombian government's ability to eradicate crops. Antioquia, Norte de Santander, and Narino Departments - collectively showed a 41 percent increase in coca in 2020 over 2019 figures. Within these areas, the three target municipalities – Caceres, Sardinata, and Tumaco — will be the core of USAID, INL, and Colombian counterpart interventions.

Implicit is an inter-agency recognition both on the U.S. and Colombian sides that for the last twenty years, the approach has been stovepiped, especially back in the early days of Plan Colombia, as the RAND report notes. Different U.S. and Colombian agencies defined the problems in Colombia in very different ways. The U.S. Department of Defense saw the guerillas as the problem, so defeating the FARC was the strategy. INL saw coca as fueling the conflict, generating corruption and disorder. Consequently, INL worked on eradicating coca. USAID focused on poverty in rural Colombia. The approaches had inter-relationships, but distinct focus areas. Both the GAO and the RAND Report called for that to change. And that is precisely what happened at the High-Level Dialogue.

Now, the Colombians and the US have jointly defined the problem as the lack of state presence. The approach will be to ameliorate the insurgency and coca in integrated approaches. The best way of doing that is to go out to these communities and offer public goods and services, economic opportunities, and do this within a framework of security.

Human Rights and Recent Social Protests

Throughout 2021, Colombia saw increases in mass displacements and homicides. There was also anecdotal evidence of increased forced recruitment of children. Youth are particularly vulnerable now. With schools closed and increased socio-economic pressure on families, kids often lack safe spaces, leading to recruitment. UN Human Rights verified 40 homicides of human rights defenders in 2021 as of August 2021.

Youth protests changed the human rights typography in 2021. Youth face extreme socio-economic hardship. They are frustrated with the status quo. And they have taken to the streets to voice their discontent.

In human rights, USAID focuses on prevention, protection, and investigation. On prevention, the emphasis is on the Ombudsman's Early Warning System to expand the reach and the scope of that so that we can be reaching more areas in the country, addressing new trends, anything from if migrants are flowing into a particular area, and they can be vulnerable to human rights violations, to issues like mass displacement, and other things. USAID is working to make this system more measurable and to monitor follow-up on it to ensure that not only are they issuing those alerts that are actionable but then the state and across the state, primarily local authorities are obligated to implement those recommendations.

On protection, USAID continues to work with the Minister of Interior's National Protection Unit to expedite protection measures. Currently, it takes about five months for human rights defenders to get those protection measures and we're trying to get that down to three if not less than that. The Agency is also looking at self-protection, which is something across society is a need and a want. USAID does that through its human rights program and local organizations. People trained in self-protection have not been killed. While USAID may not be able to claim attribution for that success, it may certainly claim contribution.

USAID is also looking at different ways to scale up protection, for example, through partnerships with the National Protection Unit and a police human rights unit which can train leaders in these types of methodologies, essentially looking at risks in a given scenario, and how to mitigate them. It can be as easy as varying a route to work, changing the time of a routine, or having a cell phone in case of a threat or emergency.

Lastly, on criminal investigation, USAID and the State Department International Law and Enforcement (INL) Bureau work together with the attorney general's office on gender-based violence, human rights, homicides, and threats. USAID has also worked closely with the Inspector General's office which undertakes disciplinary actions on public officials for failing in their duties (for example, in failing to protect social leaders). In this context, USAID has also helped implement the early warning system, a necessary accountability check which to date has been successful.

USAID is also scaling up its focus on the prevention of recruitment. Some of the programming partners with the presidential human rights adviser. She is leading a strategy that takes a comprehensive approach to engaging youth vulnerable to recruitment. The strategy seeks to provide them with safe spaces and to get them engaged in their communities in ways that make them less vulnerable to recruitment. USAID just launched a \$50 million youth activity that will be doing lots of things that also focus on prevention of recruitment. It may include anything from providing them with more socio-economic opportunities to refurbishing public spaces so that they can be participating in sports in school and things that keep them safe. The design takes a very comprehensive approach focusing on families engaging the state, and engaging communities, civil society, faith-based organizations so that children have the kind of structure that they need so that they are not vulnerable to recruitment.

Concerning the protests over the past two years, USAID partnered with the Family Welfare Institute to convene dialogue sessions. Youth wanted to be heard. USAID wanted to help with that effort. The institute brought together 5000 youth across twenty-five departments. USAID helped with the methodology as well as helping in some of the specific municipalities where they convened those dialogues. From those dialogues, the Institute listened to youth, which was what youth wanted. Next, the Institute came up with concrete plans that have now been incorporated into a youth pact as well as a policy. USAID will now be monitoring those commitments to make sure that they are followed through and that youth are rebuilding that trust that they need in a state. And within the pact, USAID is supporting many of the commitments and the policy through that youth program.

Ethnic Inclusion

USAID's work in ethnic inclusion has been very strong and an integral part of our portfolio for over twenty years. Between ten and twenty percent of the total Colombian population is of Afro-Colombian or indigenous descent. There is such a wide range because there are issues with the way Afro-Colombians and the indigenous self-identify and how the census is conducted. Either way, it is still a significant and very important part of what Colombia is, the country's very identity. And this group has been significantly impacted by conflict, especially by

displacement and forced recruitment. So USAID has been working intensively to integrate these populations in all programming. In 2008, USAID first received a Congressional earmark to work directly with Afro-Colombian and indigenous populations.

Just recently, USAID decided to start working directly with Afro-Colombian and indigenous organizations and traditional authorities - rather than through other, more traditional contractors or organizations. About two years ago, USAID made four different, direct awards, a total of \$10 million. One of the four grants is with COCOMACIA, one of the largest Afro-Colombian community councils in Colombia, representing 45,000 Afro-Colombians in Chocó and Antioquia, the northwestern part of Colombia. Another grant works with national level Afro-Colombian and indigenous organizations like the National Association of Displaced Afro-Colombians (AFRODES) on the implementation of the peace agreement. USAID also works with environmental organizations on issuing protection of indigenous territories, so that they can protect the environment within those territories. With youth - through the organization *Manos Visibles* working to empower youth - USAID strives to create opportunities to participate within their communities and within their territories.

As a result, USAID has been able to build a very close relationship with Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities. And they are the ones that inform USAID programming. They are the ones that allow USAID to know what the realities are, where the challenges are within their territories, and allow USAID to design our programs, adjust them when needed, and implement them as they go forward.

USAID engages with the government of Colombia as well. This past year, the Colombian government considered issuing specific public policies to address the specific needs of Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities. The government sought USAID's help in the design and implementation. Using USAID's already established networks at the community level, the government was able to build that bridge between the realities of the communities versus the response of the government at the national level to best support local governments to respond to the needs of Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities.

Local Engagement

USAID cannot carry out its work unless it is fully engaged with local communities and beneficiaries. A central focus of USAID's portfolio is the PDETs - the territorial development plans - under the Peace Accords. These plans were consulted widely across the peace accord focus areas with 220,000 people who defined for themselves their needs to transform their territories and move from illegality towards legality. Economic reactivation, infrastructure, connectivity, and land formalization were priorities. This consultation gives a map for USAID's work, developed by individuals in the beneficiary communities themselves.

When USAID designs programs, it goes to the communities themselves to meet with citizens and local government officials in a grassroots process. This is a bottom-up, civilian-led process rather than the more traditional, top-down, military-led strategies from Colombia's past. With ethnic organizations, USAID/Colombia has 54 programs, 22 of which are direct with local

organizations (not through other international organizations, contractors, or grantees). That is about a 75% increase of working with local groups over just a couple of years ago. When USAID designs new programs, it issues a procurement request for information that allows a range of local actors, in the communities, in the national government, in the private sector, to give the Agency feedback and to make sure the designs reflect real needs with viable solutions.

The pandemic made things difficult. During quarantine, those connections with beneficiaries and with counterparts suffered. It is not the same behind a computer screen as meeting in person. Nevertheless, USAID committed to connecting virtually with weekly conversations with human rights defenders and environmental defenders and social leaders, ethnic groups, other vulnerable populations, migrants, local mayors, anyone necessary to keep programs connected to the beneficiaries in the communities where we work. As quarantine measures lightened, USAID staff have been able to get out much more frequently.

Private Sector Engagement

With ethnic communities, USAID has worked closely with the Colombian private sector. Colombia has a vibrant, private sector. USAID developed a strategy to engage businesses in programming. Most importantly, after the design, to expand employment and create companies in regions that before signing the peace agreement were completely inaccessible. Today, USAID has nine such direct alliances with Colombian companies. These include Colombia's largest chocolate production company, dairies and finance institutions in which, in sum, USAID/Colombia invested \$30 million, and the private sector matched with \$110 million.

In addition to those direct alliances, USAID developed 78 public-private partnerships. In these, USAID invested \$12 million and leveraged \$21 million from the private sector. Those alliances focus on catalyzing local economies for targeted rural communities, promoting biodiversity and conservation of ecosystems.

Take-Aways

Addressing narcotics concerns is no longer a simple matter of "hectares eradicated," if it ever was. Today, a holistic approach is needed on both the Colombian and U.S. sides to the peace process to extend state presence and security, reduce poverty, preserve the environment - and ultimately reduce coca production. The High-Level Dialogue underscores the importance of this U.S.-Colombia partnership. It charts a new direction for integrated rural development in support of the peace accord. There is wide support for this approach on both sides, and the new focus should provide better opportunities for Colombia's rural poor, especially Afro-Colombian and indigenous populations who overwhelmingly suffered during the armed conflict. As peace returns, new economic opportunities will emerge. As state presence extends to more rural communities, providing the benefits of a democratic society, crime should fall as incentives for criminality also decline. This will take a long-term commitment, but the way forward is now clear.

Draft: Steve Hendrix, LAC/SA, 1/28/2022, 920-750-8652

Clearances:

Office:	Status:	Date:
USAID/Colombia: Christopher Saenger	Clear	1/31/2022
LAC/SA: Michael Eddy	Clear	1/31/2022
LAC/SPO/Comms: Chelsea Milko	Clear w/edits	1/28/2022
LAC/FO: Peter Natiello	Clear w/edits	1/31/2022
PPL: Eric Ambrose	Info	1/28/2022
LPA/PE: SLajaunie	Info	02/01/2022
GC/LAC: Lou Wise	Clear	1/31/2022
ACTF: Listserve (INFO)		
DDI: Carrie Mitchell (INFO)		