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Colombia Increases Security, Services in La Macarena to Overturn Coca and Conflict

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Mission of the Month: Colombia

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Challenge

The lack of state presence in large parts of Colombia has allowed illegally armed groups to operate with impunity, creating the conditions for growing and trafficking coca, and for moving arms and guerillas.

Government efforts to consolidate state presence in these areas has had limited success, despite three decades of fighting Colombia's coca-fueled guerilla war. But change has begun.

Since 2007, USAID has worked closely with Colombian government officials in La Macarena to develop and carry out a model consolidation plan for bringing peace and stability to conflict regions. La Macarena is in a strategically important area in the Department of Meta, which is close to the geographic center of the country, and just east of the Andes Mountains in the Llanos plains. It is also one of the major coca-producing parts of Colombia.

Innovative Response

First, the Colombian army establishes permanent security for communities—a departure from the days when the military ejected guerilla groups and moved on, leaving communities at the mercy of the guerillas when they inevitably returned. Security creates conditions for manual eradication of coca by police-led teams and voluntary eradication efforts by the community.

Next, small, quick-impact infrastructure and income-generating projects are carried out that immediately demonstrate state presence. These include rehabilitation and equipping of schools and health facilities, and technical assistance and resources for farmers. The goal is to transition from coca to legal economies.

Children from La Balestera Márden Izquierdo in the Department of Meta in Colombia work with a new educational kit at their recently renovated school.

Longer-term projects follow such as helping farmers get legal title to their land; improving education; health services; and strengthening agricultural producer associations.

At the local level, military, police, and civilians work together through a "Fusion Center."

At the national level, the Center for the Coordination of Integrated Action (CCAI) brings together 14 government ministries to coordinate establishing government services in post-conflict parts of the country. USAID has provided technical assistance to CCAI to improve its efforts throughout the country.

Results

When the Colombian government decided to carry out a pilot plan in La Macarena, USAID provided assistance to:

- develop a three-year plan to establish state presence
- hire and support civilian staff for the consolidation plan
- increase the capacity of mayors' offices to provide services
- carry out hundreds of small, quick-impact infrastructure and income-generating projects—such as repairs to market roads—to create confidence in the Colombian government; and
- conduct surveys, improve communications, and help prevent youth recruitment by illegally armed groups.

Little over a year has passed since the consolidation plan began, and the military continues to expand the secured areas, followed by an increasingly positive perception by communities. More than 9,000 hectares (22,239 acres) of coca have been eradicated without the typical widespread violence and community protests. Replanting rates are less than 3 percent.

Today, as improved security is perceived as permanent in large parts of the region, the private sector is becoming more involved. As an example, more than 4,000 hectares of rice were planted this year in previously insecure areas and where rice has never been grown before.

Increasingly, La Macarena is viewed as a model to launch consolidated state presence, spur economic and social development, and restore long-term peace in other parts of Colombia that are suffering from violence and narco-trafficking. ★

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