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FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

COLOMBIA

CASE STUDY

“Returning to the Place We Never Wanted to Leave”

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Farmer makes daily journey to work the land on his newly restituted land plot in Córdoba, Colombia



Photo: LRU

“People say that a man at my age has no energy left, but I look at my cassava, corn and squash crops and feel more than hope: I want to keep going. Now we have a brighter future. Being able to return to my property, with the woman who has been at my side for more than 35 years, fills me with happiness.”

Source: LRU

CHALLENGE For the past half-century, violence and terror associated with Colombia’s internal armed conflict have driven over 5 million people from their land and communities. In 2011, the Government of Colombia (GOC) passed the Victims and Land Restitution Law of 2011, a historic piece of legislation aimed at promoting reconciliation through a comprehensive reparations process that includes land restitution for displaced victims of the conflict. The Land Restitution Unit (LRU), a semiautonomous entity in the Ministry of Agriculture, was established under the law to carry out the enormous task of restituting land.

INITIATIVE Through projects such as its Public Policy Program, USAID has provided crucial support to the GOC to help it formulate and draft the Victims Law and later design the Land Restitution Unit, assisting the government craft the tools and inter-agency coordination mechanisms necessary to ensure its efficient and effective operation. The USAID Land and Rural Development Program (LRDP) is a new, five-year initiative that is continuing this targeted technical support to the Colombian government. LRDP focuses specifically on helping the government achieve a successful regional rollout of land and rural development policies, including restitution.

RESULTS One of LRDP’s focus areas are two municipalities in Córdoba, particularly hard hit over the years by successive waves of violence. Yet, despite decades of atrocities and horror, citizens are beginning to return home and claim the benefits afforded to them under the Victims and Land Restitution Law. For example, Don Carlos is a 77-year-old farmer who recently purchased a horse as part of the productive project component of the government’s comprehensive reparations package.

Everyday, Don Carlos and his new companion “Return,” wake before the sun and set off to tend the family’s crops. After fleeing because of violence 12 years ago, he is finally able to return and reconstruct his life with his family, doing what he knows best: growing crops and living off the fruits of the land.

“My day begins at 4:00 in the morning. [My wife] Yolanda packs up my breakfast and lunch and we set off for our land, where we cultivate cassava, squash and corn. We [...] return to the land where my family was born [...] returning to a place we never wanted to leave.”

According to Yolanda, “The arrival of the Land Restitution Unit is the best thing that has happened in recent years. Soon, we’ll return and build our house so that we can live here in addition to harvesting the land...” Looking forward, the family plans to invest in four cows. This purchase will contribute to a productive and sustainable return.

Don Carlos is confident that “what the government has done is unprecedented and won’t be seen at any other point in history. I urge everyone to believe in this law. At first, we were afraid, but today, six months after receiving our first payment and seeing our crops, I’m able to confirm that you can return with guarantees.”

“I am very happy. These have been some of the best days of my life. I owe everything to God and the blessing of productive projects. Harvesting and bringing my crops home in order to feed my family is the nicest experience a man like me can have in life.”