



Getting the Lay of the Land

USAID and local government partners created a municipal land office to tackle the titling of more than 4,600 parcels in Santander de Quilichao. By building capacity at local levels of government, rural mayors and their teams are equipped to confront land informality head on.



The new Land Office in Santander de Quilichao plans to formalize 100 land parcels occupied by public entities, such as schools, in 2017.

In Santander de Quilichao, there are an estimated 4,600 informally owned private parcels eligible for titling and more than 200 untitled publicly owned lands, such as schools and health centers.

At the end of 2016, an infrastructure project in rural Santander de Quilichao was on the brink of losing its funding. Local government officials faced the threat of having to return over US\$50,000 if the project's property was not formalized as municipal property. The project, which was already finished and bringing potable water to over 800 users, was being financed under an agreement with Cauca's departmental government.

The municipality did something it had never done before: titled a public property in just nine days.

The municipality's recently created Land Office produced a property title before New Year's Day 2017, and the investment was saved. The infrastructure project was the office's first challenge, and its three-man team responded swimmingly.

"The municipalities of Northern Cauca have a lot of needs in basic sanitation, energy, and infrastructure. They are very rural, and overall there is little money flowing in—so if the municipality can obtain funding and is willing to make the investment, the last thing we need is to miss the opportunity due to our inability to register the property," explains Jaime Andrés Devia, legal assistant in the Land Office.

Santander de Quilichao's Land Office, which is the result of a partnership with the USAID-funded Land and Rural Development Program, is already playing a critical role in the municipality's land administration processes and in promoting awareness on how to formalize land rights among the area's 100,000 residents.

Perhaps most important, the office acts as a link with Colombia's National Land Agency at a time when the government is poised to formalize land tenure on a massive scale as part of the commitments made in Colombia's peace agreement with the FARC. The ongoing decentralization of land administration tasks means that the government is placing a larger responsibility on departmental and municipal governments to support to land formalization, land restitution, and rural development.

"When the Land Agency decides on its strategy and how it will carry out massive formalization throughout Colombia, Santander de Quilichao will have a great deal of the work done, especially thanks to the Municipal Formalization Plan," says Devia.

The plan, a result of USAID's institutional strengthening programming, is an official roadmap for the Land Office. In Santander de Quilichao, there are an estimated 4,600 informally owned private parcels. This number represents 62% of all parcels eligible for titling in the municipality, which has over 30,000 parcels. However, many of these are collectively owned by indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities and cannot be titled by the municipal government.

There are also more than 200 untitled publicly owned lands, such as schools and health centers, around the municipality. The new office has made titling 100 of these a top priority in 2017, a necessary step to respond to the needs of citizens who live on untitled urban lots and lack basic services.



“The municipality’s public properties are widely dispersed, and we have never had a clear overview of how many or which ones are titled. With USAID and now the Land Office, we can start inventorying our assets, meet the comptroller’s requirements, and invest in our public goods,” explains Santander de Quilichao’s mayor, Álvaro Mendoza Bermúdez.

Under the partnership, USAID equipped the office with computers and a land surveying kit, and funded the salaries of three experts in land and property administration for six months. The team—capable of carrying out formalization of urban properties from start to finish—brings a new degree of technical capacity to the municipality.

To get the office up and running, the team first had to review existing land files to determine which properties had been incorrectly adjudicated or measured, as well as which ones were missing critical property data.

“We found files that had very ambiguous information about where properties are located. Some say that a property ends where the tall tree meets the river or extends to the ridge on the other side of the field,” explains Álvaro Corda, the office topographer.

They also expect to play a significant role in supporting the National Land Agency to carry out massive formalization in rural areas. When USAID funding ends in June 2017, a municipality-funded team will take over, incorporating the skills and knowledge of the experts.

Settling the Settlers

In the peri-urban hills just outside Santander de Quilichao, more than 60 families settled an area of seven hectares. The families live in makeshift houses

with dirt floors and mud walls, and they have no sewage system or access to potable water. Most of them were displaced by the conflict as many as ten years ago, losing their connection with the agrarian economy and, as a result, their livelihoods. Though they live relatively close to the urban center, they work mostly as day laborers in nearby sugarcane fields.

Equipped with land surveying tools and legal expertise, the Land Office is working to turn these families into property owners, which will enable the municipality to offer them basic services and access to government subsidies. In addition, by organizing the unplanned neighborhood, the municipality will be able to resolve residents’ request for a community center and a soccer field.

“We want a house with dignity and a future for our children. We hope this will let us all have houses made of bricks and the chance for a better reality,” says Luz Angel Muñoz, president of the Vida Nueva neighborhood association.

Since 2015, USAID has partnered with three municipalities in the departments of Cauca, Meta, and Sucre to establish land offices. These one-stop shops for land administration facilitate rural development initiatives and allow the municipalities to deliver on state-led land titling strategies that take the onus off land owners. Local land offices can help the government more effectively meet its responsibility to address land informality in Colombia.

By 2018, the USAID program will support the formalization of more than 1,100 parcels that are home to public entities—including over 600 public schools—in 57 municipalities.



“We have a multicultural population, and land formalization will help us avoid conflict among neighbors who are not sure where their property ends. Better land administration will increase social harmony. It’s not just about having a title, it’s about supporting peace.”

— Álvaro Mendoza Bermúdez, mayor of Santander de Quilichao