

Testimony of John Barsa
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Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate
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Chairman Rubio, Ranking Member Cardin, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to testify today. I appreciate this Subcommittee's support for USAID's work to advance U.S. national security and prosperity through programs in the Republic of Colombia that further a just and sustainable peace, promote rural economic development, promote the growth of licit economies and help the country support the influx of Venezuelan migrants.

As Administrator Mark Green said during one of his recent trips to Colombia, "There is no more important relationship [for the United States] in this Hemisphere." I completely agree with Administrator Green, which is why, as USAID's Assistant Administrator for the Latin America and Caribbean Bureau, I chose to make Colombia the destination for my first international trip last month.

During my August trip, I witnessed USAID's work with the Government of Colombia in a number of different sectors. I also met with key members of President Iván Duque's Administration, including Vice-President Marta Lucía Ramírez, Vice, Minister of Health Iván Darío González, Presidential Border Manager Felipe Muñoz, High Commissioner for Security Rafael Guarín, and Presidential Advisor for Stabilization and Consolidation Emilio José Archila. I also met a number of Colombia's courageous social leaders, including from ethnic and minority groups.

Each Colombian official reiterated the Duque Government's commitment to a strong relationship with the United States. In each of these meetings, I underscored USAID's commitment to helping Colombia advance on the Journey to Self-Reliance and solidify a long-lasting peace.

To understand USAID's approach in Colombia, it is essential to understand the country's over five decades of violent conflict. Despite this tumultuous history, the country has made significant strides. USAID is collaborating closely with the Duque Administration on a multi-sectoral approach that promotes licit economies, inclusiveness, reconciliation, and stability.

For example, USAID takes several approaches to foster licit livelihoods for Colombians, including promoting alternative development, increasing financial inclusion and addressing land tenure. All of these activities aim to promote stability, whether it is giving young people better opportunities to discourage them from joining transnational criminal organizations, or providing former combatants with legal economic opportunities and better futures.

We remain concerned about reports that human-rights defenders are being targeted. The protection of human rights defenders and social leaders is a priority for USAID and the US Embassy in Bogotá. USAID uses a holistic, cross-sectoral strategy to address the situation that

confronts human-rights defenders by promoting respect for the rule of law, dignity, and fundamental freedoms; preventing abuses; and strengthening the Government of Colombia's capacity to respond.

In 2016, we launched our Inclusion for Peace (IPA) activity, with the aim of fostering greater social and economic inclusion of Afro-Colombians and indigenous communities as a means of advancing peace and reconciliation in Colombia. By 2020, we expect that this initiative will have provided 12,000 individuals from these marginalized communities access to formal job opportunities. In addition to IPA, USAID has focused engagement with Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities through several other activities, including the Fulbright and Martin Luther King, Jr., fellowships.

We also seek to bring other partners to the equation. At USAID, we believe that sustainable, economic empowerment -- all development -- must include robust participation from the private sector. Private sector leadership is essential to kick-start economic growth and lower social and economic inequality. The private sector offers technologies, innovation, expertise, and networks that can advance our development goals and those of the Colombian people. The private sector also offers significant resources. In Colombia, we leveraged nearly \$163 million in private sector funds in Fiscal Year (FY) 2018 and the first half of FY 2019.

My first official event in Colombia was in support of USAID's Rural Financial Alliance, a compelling example of how we want to implement our Private Sector Engagement Policy. For years, USAID has been helping people in Colombia's rural areas to find legal economic opportunities, especially in those regions affected by violence, drug trafficking, illegal mining and armed groups. We have helped entrepreneurs and small producers in cacao, coffee, dairy, rubber, and beekeeping to improve their products, and connected them to local and international markets.

But even as they have found success in these ventures, the people in these regions have lacked access to the financial services that would solidify their progress and grow their businesses.

Since 2015, USAID has co-invested with the private sector under the Rural Financial Alliance to provide these critical services in 197 target municipalities. With support from USAID, financial intermediaries have channeled \$848 million in financial services to those 197 prioritized municipalities. These financial services are mainly productive credits, savings accounts, and micro-insurance -- essential tools that are now helping Colombians in rural areas thrive. It is these types of results that exemplify how critical engagement with the private sector is to finding, financing, and implementing lasting solutions.

One crucial program has a particularly relevant role across multiple sectors: land tenure. USAID and the Duque Administration have worked together on the formalization of land titles, which is central to addressing inequality in rural areas, promoting socio-economic development and licit economic growth, and advancing peace-building efforts. To signify both countries' commitment to this important issue, in May, President Duque and Administrator Green signed a joint statement of support to encourage the completion of the Mass Land Formalization and Cadaster pilot being developed in the municipality of Ovejas, in Sucre Department. This past August, the

program delivered its first 1,000 land titles to Colombians who participated, a historic milestone in implementation of the peace accords.

The Ovejas pilot is an unprecedented initiative in Colombia that seeks to offer viable and proven solutions to the country's land problems by reducing both the time and costs associated with the formalization of clear property rights, especially in the most conflict-affected regions.

Not only does proper land tenure help stabilize communities and decrease conflict, it also promotes licit livelihoods. We have seen that without legal land title, more than 75 percent of former coca growers return to the illicit economy, whereas when they have clear title, the rate of recidivism drops to less than 25 percent.

Another critical imperative of Colombia's peace process is reconciliation among victims, ex-combatants, and other citizens. The Colombian conflict and associated violence created a tragic legacy of millions of victims, including those forcibly displaced from their homes, land, and communities. USAID is collaborating closely with the Duque Administration to build the capacity of key institutions in the Colombian government charged with delivering services, reparations, and transitional justice to these victims as mandated by Colombian law.

For example, I had the opportunity to meet with the Truth Commission and the Unit to Search for Disappeared Persons, both of which have received funding from USAID to support engaging victims, civil society, and justice officials in the processes and dialogues of the Truth Commission.

During my meeting with the President of the Truth Commission, Father Francisco de Roux, and Luz Marina Monzón, Director of the Unit to Search for Disappeared Persons, we discussed the strategies, challenges, and impacts that these two main institutions are making in the reconciliation process. This process is not easy, and there will be many challenges along the way.

As reported in the press, a former commander of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) recently called on his followers to take up arms against the Colombian Government. This is a grim reminder that after decades of armed conflict, it remains necessary to keep supporting Colombia's path toward a sustainable and stable peace. The reintegration of former FARC members into Colombian society is crucial to this reconciliation process as it breaks the cycle of violence and criminality. USAID will not be deterred from promoting peace and encouraging a culture of legality.

Colombia is the focus of today's hearing, but I would be remiss not to mention the Venezuela regional crisis. Venezuela is experiencing a man-made, regime-driven political and economic crisis that has led to severe shortages of food and medicine and has driven more than 4.3 million people to flee their once-prosperous country since 2014.

This outflow of vulnerable Venezuelans is straining healthcare, education, and other social services in neighboring countries, especially Colombia. When I visited the city of Cúcuta on the

Colombia-Venezuela border last month, I saw firsthand the dire humanitarian effects this crisis is having on Colombians and Venezuelans alike.

It was during this visit that I also fully recognized the generosity of the Colombian people and the Duque Administration for their continued support for and hospitality toward Venezuelans who have fled the tyranny and chaos in their country. The stories I heard from migrants about living conditions inside Venezuela created by the devastating and corrupt policies of the former Maduro regime were truly shocking.

To help the region cope with this man-made crisis, the United States has provided nearly \$377 million - including nearly \$334 million in humanitarian aid and \$43 million in economic and development assistance - since FY2017. Of this amount, \$213 million has been for Colombia -- \$37.1 million in development assistance and \$ 175 million in humanitarian assistance.

We salute Colombia and President Duque, who has served as a regional leader on this response, and we thank the other countries in the region for their support for the Venezuelan people and the legitimate Government of Interim President Juan Guaidó. We continue to call upon other donors to make or increase contributions to help address the crisis in Venezuela. We are also particularly grateful to Congress for your support on this issue.

The partnership between the U.S. and Colombian Governments reaps dividends on both sides. USAID's projects work best when governments, civil society, and the private sector in host countries also invest in our programming. The Duque Administration has been an excellent partner in our joint cooperation. USAID is prepared to continue to help Colombia address the country's most-pressing challenges, advance Colombians' progress along the Journey to Self-Reliance and secure a lasting peace.

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you again for your commitment to USAID and to our work in Colombia. I look forward to your questions.