Laying the Foundation: Land and Livelihoods

In Southern Tolima, USAID displays an integrated approach to land tenure that builds government capacity, strengthens economic development, and protects property rights.

For the past ten years, Eloísa Garzón Ángel—a mother of six living in Potrerito, a lonely outpost in the arid mountains of Southern Tolima, near Ataco—has witnessed, during each election season, how local politicians drive up to visit the 250 families living in this conflict-ridden and forgotten corner of Colombia.

“They come up and promise us heaven and earth, but all anybody wants here is a paved road,” she explains.

The road, which was first excavated 30 years ago, played a strategic role in the military strategy of the Colombian leftist rebels known as the FARC, allowing them to transit and control a large swath of south central Colombia between Meta and Tolima. Today the road mostly causes headaches for the estimated 1,000 people living in these mountains. The farmers and ranchers—who are dedicated to growing coffee on the steep hillsides and keeping cattle where they can—find it hard to compete, forced to pay such high costs to get their products to market.

Southern Tolima was always the FARC’s major stronghold and is the rebel army’s birthplace. In the early nineties, the FARC started to canvas the mountains west of the urban center of Ataco before its official invasion in 1997. Two years later, the rebels attacked and controlled Ataco, sparking an ongoing battle for this and neighboring municipalities that would last more than a decade.

Between 2001 and 2007, most families in these mountains fled to cities as far as Bogotá to escape the violence. That is where Eloisa and her family went after leaving their farm, with very little on their backs. They spent four years struggling to find jobs and secure support from the complex government processes to assist displaced people.

“Leave everything you’ve created, everything you’ve made to go to a big city to suffer hunger and sleep on the floor is a sad solution for a displaced person,” she explains. “Life in Bogotá is expensive and you never stop spending money. It’s not like living in the countryside.”

For those years as a displaced family, she couldn’t afford to put her 12-year-old son in school.

When it was safe to return, Eloisa and other families trickled back into the region, back to their farms. With them came the government’s Land Restitution Unit (LRU) to assist victims with presenting comprehensive reparation claims that would increase land security, rebuild homes, and make strategic investments in agricultural development.

Once the area around Ataco’s urban center was safe enough to intervene in, the LRU prepared some of the country’s first land restitution cases. The Garzón family filed a claim for their three-hectare farm located on a hillside above Ataco. In 2015, a restitution sentence recognized their property, required the government to title their land, and stipulated a series of reparations to improve their lives, including materials to build a house and the family’s participation in an agricultural project centering on cacao.

“The help from the government is sacred. When you see their doors open like this, it really gives us hope. We are believers that the reparations will help victims,” she says.

Building Sustainability

At the beginning of the land restitution process, many of the court orders passed down from judges were either ignored entirely or passed off to the LRU, even when the responsibility for compliance was the responsibility of other entities. And for the LRU, Southern Tolima is where many of the unit’s processes were tested and put in place.

“Ataco is the municipality with the highest number of restitution sentences in the country. This has made us the tip of the restitution spear, so to speak,” explains Luis Alfonso Ruiz Alegria, the LRU’s regional director in Tolima.

In 2015, USAID began working in nine municipalities in Southern Tolima, through its innovative Land and Rural Development Program, which approaches peace and stability through a lens combining restitution, land normalization, and economic development.
The program first focused its energy on increasing the capacity of the regional government and local municipal administrations to ensure the implementation of more than 200 restitution sentences such as that of the Garzón family. The sentences include more than 900 orders. USAID experts began by reviewing the operational structure of the regional government in responding to restitution sentences and by formulating Territorial Action Plans in order to secure funds to comply with restitution orders.

“At the beginning, many of our secretariats thought that restitution didn’t have anything to do with them. We have advanced a great deal, changing this paradigm and creating pathways that identify each secretariat’s role in a given restitution ruling,” explains Juliana Jurado Peña, the former director of Tolima’s Office of Human Rights.

Through technical roundtables and workshops coordinated by USAID, each secretariat within Tolima’s government established a liaison responsible for guiding the implementation of restitution rulings within that office. At the same time, USAID worked with local governments to create response mechanisms and promote transitional justice committees encompassing all sectors of government. In Ataco, the transitional justice committee meets every other month and includes the mayor and victims’ representatives.

“In the committee meetings, we discuss the progress of each court order. That way we can find the problems blocking the advancement of restitution, fix them, and report them back to the regional government,” explains Lizeth Katherine Rayo, coordinator of Ataco’s Victims’ Office. “The projects designed to respond to victims are important, especially in areas where cacao roads and agriculture strengthening are needed.”

**The Cacao Movement**

Eloísa’s children, Enrique and Schneider, knew that coffee farming in this region of Ataco was risky business. Not only do fluctuations in the climate wreak havoc on farmers, but finding cherry pickers has become increasingly difficult, especially due to the difficult road conditions. So, in 2013, the Garzón family opted for government support for their cacao operation, and the LRU delivered 1,000 cacao seedlings and extension support through agriculture experts as part of the restitution sentence. That support lasted a little under two years, and left the family still searching to find reliable buyers.

To complement this restitution initiative, USAID approached government partners to create a public-private partnership (PPP) that would increase productivity in the cacao value chain. More than 1,000 cacao growers, including 140 in Ataco, are participating. The PPP—valued at more than $2.3 million—also includes private sector players such as CasaLuker and the National Chocolate Company, both of which sponsor technical field trips and technology transfer workshops for participants. The private sector partners also give farmers a reliable outlet for their produce.

“We realized that we have a serious problem with production in Ataco. Farmers are producing just 350 kilos per hectare, way below the optimal yields of 1,500 kilos,” explains Carlos Andrés Triviño, Ataco’s secretary of rural development.

To begin remediating the production side of cacao in Ataco, the PPP created a farmers’ school that trains producers in improved production techniques. The school is located south of Ataco in Santiago Pérez, the municipality’s most important cacao-producing zone. Following a year in the farmers’ school, the Garzón brothers will become cacao multipliers who will continue promoting improved cacao species among families in their area. Indeed, many of the restituted families have just begun to see the advantages that cacao has over coffee.

“With USAID, we went to the restitution areas to raise awareness of the cacao PPP, because it is our duty to link them to the agriculture projects being implemented,” says Triviño. “That part of Ataco is famous for cattle and coffee, but in reality the conditions are ideal for cacao. With the multipliers, farmers will have more access to information and material to make those types of changes on their land.”

To complete the puzzle, USAID stepped in to facilitate the mobilization of more than $1.3 million dollars to cover the cost of rehabilitating the road. So far, the regional government has committed to providing its part, and the use of national-level funds is being discussed. However, unless the government paves the road, for the Garzón family, this could seem just another empty campaign promise and an obstacle to the area’s progress in Colombia’s post-conflict era.

“Together with USAID, we have helped Tolima’s government achieve a greater impact for restituted communities. We’ve developed various mechanisms that allow the departmental government a clearer idea of the steps involved in complying with restitution rulings and in achieving objectives that go beyond simply placing victims back on their land.”

— Juliana Jurado Peña, former director of Tolima’s Office of Human Rights