

Remarks of Peter Natiello
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Before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere
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Chairwoman Salazar, Ranking Member Castro, and distinguished members of the subcommittee – thank you for the opportunity to testify today on USAID’s longstanding partnership with Colombia.

It is in the interest of the United States to partner with a peaceful, democratic, stable, and prosperous Colombia on the global challenges we face in the Americas and beyond. Defending democracy, addressing climate change, and managing migration are key areas that require our continued close collaboration. USAID’s decades-long partnership with Colombia has helped advance the United States’ long-term interests.

USAID’s work in Colombia crosses several decades, five U.S. administrations, and five Colombian presidencies. We partner with a broad range of Colombian stakeholders – democratically elected governments, the vibrant private sector, active civil society, and marginalized communities.

USAID supports Colombia’s own efforts to invest in its historically marginalized and violence-prone territories in the following ways: first, to strengthen state presence; second, to advance sustainable, licit economic development; and third, to create a culture of citizen rights and responsibilities associated with democratic governance.

We support implementation of the 2016 Peace Accord because it creates the conditions to achieve these objectives.

Additionally, and since 2017, USAID has moved with purpose to support Colombia’s generous efforts to integrate the nearly three million Venezuelans, forced to leave their country as a result of the corruption, gross mismanagement, and human rights abuses of the autocratic Maduro regime. Of the 7 million people displaced from Venezuela, approximately 6 million have relocated within South America and more than half that number have settled in Colombia.

Strengthening State Presence

USAID has been a longstanding partner in bringing greater state presence to Colombia’s conflict-prone, marginalized regions. The country’s historically neglected rural areas are characterized by violence, narco trafficking, illegal economies, human rights violations, corruption, and underdevelopment.

USAID has supported the efforts of successive Colombian governments to move beyond the country’s powerful, modern cities of Bogota, Medellin, Cali, Cartagena, and others, and to lay the foundations of democratic governance in what many have referred to as *Colombia Profunda* (“Other Colombia”). The Peace Accord is an important step in creating improved conditions for tying those marginalized territories to the rest of the nation.

Over the years, USAID has closely collaborated with U.S. Government partners, including the Departments of State and Defense, to support successive Colombian governments to increase public investment in these regions, resulting in improved security, schools, roads, healthcare, justice services, and protection of social leaders. There is still much work to be done but these territories are where USAID's commitment and focus lie.

More recently, and consistent with chapter one of the Peace Accord, USAID assisted Colombia's national and local governments to extend land titles to over 11,000 rural citizens through 30 municipal and regional land offices. This work spurs development in depressed rural areas, and can help stem narcotrafficking as experience tells us that farmers are less likely to replant coca on land they hold legal title to.

Strengthening Sustainable Licit Economic Development in Rural Areas

The Peace Accord strengthens the conditions for developing the agricultural bounty of the Colombian countryside while conserving Colombia's rich biodiversity and expansive tropical forests as key assets in the fight against climate change. Colombia's conflict-prone rural areas have long been home to illicit economic activities, including narcotrafficking, land grabbing, illegal mining, and illegal logging.

USAID's long-term commitment to these regions has enabled thousands of farmers to abandon coca production in favor of the renowned specialty coffees Colombians are so rightfully proud of; a flourishing cacao sector that increased total production by 36.5% from 2014-2021; and a wide range of agricultural products found on shelves in the country's busy supermarkets.

USAID's work with Colombia's powerful private sector has been an important element of these achievements. For example, with a combination of very modest investments in technical assistance and loan guarantees to several Colombian banks, USAID helped unlock over one billion dollars in commercial finance for nearly 900,000 small businesses and smallholder farmers.

Additionally, USAID has accomplished pioneering climate change mitigation and adaptation work with Colombia, enabling Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities to generate important revenue streams through the sale of carbon credits from the protection of the country's vast tropical forests. Since 2020, our work has helped generate \$27 million in carbon credit sales for these communities. Soon we will expand these efforts from the forests of the country's Pacific coast to its Amazon region.

Building Democratic Citizenship

In a country of about 50 million people, Colombia's 52-year conflict left over 9 million victims in its wake – including Afro Colombians, Indigenous peoples, women, young people, social leaders, human rights activists, and journalists. It is precisely to attend to the needs of victims that the Peace Accord was signed.

USAID has been at Colombia's side for many years to ensure that conflict victims can be afforded the truth, justice, restitution, and commitments of non-repetition enshrined in Chapter 5 of the Peace Accord. For example, USAID supported the drafting of the Victims and Land Restitution Law of 2011 and served as Colombia's number one partner in the implementation of this important policy and precursor to the Accord.

With the signing of the Accord, USAID supported Colombia's Integrated System for Peace, which includes the Truth Commission, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, and the Unit for the Search of Disappeared Persons. With the Truth Commission, USAID worked to compile and publicize testimonies that have helped tens of thousands of victims understand what happened to their loved ones. With that truth, they have begun the long and arduous healing process. Additionally, we have helped victims organizations to bring cases before the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, the Transitional Justice Court charged with holding all parties to the conflict accountable.

Advancing the full social and economic inclusion of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous Peoples - disproportionately victimized by the armed conflict - is key to a stable and lasting peace and a steady focus of the United States' work in Colombia. USAID championed the participation of ethnic groups and other historically marginalized Colombians in the peace process and advocated for inclusion of the "Chapter on Ethnic Perspectives" in the Peace Accord. Last year, the United States became the first international accompanier to that chapter.

I want to recognize the House Foreign Affairs Committee's Ranking Member, Congressman Gregory Meeks, and the entire Congressional Black Caucus for steadfastly championing Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities and mobilizing U.S. resources to support their self-determined development and their full participation in the Peace Accord.

We recognize that, despite the signing of the Accord and the important advances in human rights over the past decade, attacks against Colombia's human rights and environmental defenders have risen in the years since the Accord's signing in 2016. Last year marked the highest number of recorded homicides against human rights defenders to date, according to Colombia's own statistics. Respected NGOs, including Frontline Defenders and Global Witness, consider Colombia the deadliest place for environmental and human rights defenders globally.

For this reason, USAID continues working with Colombian partners to protect human rights leaders and environmental defenders, prevent violent attacks against them, and reduce impunity for these crimes. We provided technical assistance to the Office of the Attorney General that resulted in prosecutions of 112 homicides.

We will not stop there. More must be done to address this violence and we are committed to ensuring it remains a top priority of our foreign assistance.

A Model for Managing Migration

In addition to the challenges of building peace in the country's marginalized regions, Colombia, and the broader region, are presently confronted with complex and unprecedented migration challenges. As it takes robust action to meet these daunting challenges head on, Colombia is creating a model for effective migrant integration that holds lessons for this hemisphere and beyond.

USAID has provided technical assistance to the Government of Colombia including recruiting over 300 officials to support nearly 100 registration points and providing crucial technology like biometric systems, to implement the generous Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and regularization policies which help Venezuelans fleeing the disastrous Maduro regime to permanently settle in Colombia and provide a humane alternative to the dangerous journey through the Darién.

With USAID support, Colombia has already pre-registered nearly 2.5 million people and approved TPS status for more than 1.9 million migrants. According to recent data collected by Colombia's migration agency, it is estimated that only 1.8% of the migrants making the dangerous journey through the Darién have TPS, demonstrating that the program is a powerful tool for deterring irregular migration.

With the generous support from Congress, USAID continues to support Colombia's efforts to help Venezuelan migrants to integrate into communities, educate their children, access healthcare, get jobs, open bank accounts, and settle where they are. And we know these migrants are less likely to travel to the United States if they can be integrated into Colombian society.

Conclusion

After more than five decades of war, Colombia has taken important steps toward lasting peace, security, stability and prosperity. The Colombian people still have much work to do, and USAID is committed to accompanying them in pursuit of our common interests.

We look forward to deepening the impact of our work and broadening our partnership with every part of Colombia – its democratically elected government, its vibrant private sector, its active civil society, and its marginalized communities – whose will and sacrifice makes change possible.

And we are grateful for Congress's unwavering, bipartisan support for the US-Colombia relationship over the past two decades, which has made USAID's work to build an enduring partnership with the people of Colombia possible.

I look forward to your questions.