

IDRC contributions to the Colombian peace process

Report

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After 50 years of civil war, Colombians are starting to contemplate a future that holds peace. As negotiations between the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) progress, many are looking beyond the signing of an accord at the issues that will be key to its successful implementation and enhance the broader peace process.

IDRC support for research in the country has contributed to this peace process in several ways, notably in understanding key issues such as land restitution, avenues for rural development, and access to justice for victims of violence.

“After Syria, Colombia is the country with the most internally displaced persons, deaths, forced disappearances, and communities that are suffering,” says Markus Gottsbacher, a senior program specialist at IDRC, who has overseen a number of projects focusing on peace in Colombia. Addressing a history of dispossession

The restitution of land to smallholder farmers who were displaced by drug traffickers and warlords is a difficult issue to resolve. For decades small-scale farmers have lost land by violent means, and understanding the historic dimension of this question is crucial to ending the conflict.

An IDRC-supported research team produced an historical account of the violence related to agrarian and land conflicts in the most affected departments of Cordoba and Sucre on the Caribbean Coast. Researchers recommended measures to help navigate the complicated process, contributing to provisions in a 2011 law on victims and land restitution. Because women smallholders can be invisible in formal procedures, the law includes measures ensuring their access to land they have lost.

Access to justice and development

Indigenous women’s experience of conflict-related violence was at the heart of a project bringing together Colombian and Guatemalan women, who were victims of sexual violence as a result of conflict, to discuss their strategies to gain access to justice.

“The community authorities weren’t supportive at first,” Gottsbacher explains, “but they eventually acknowledged the problem and are looking at how to facilitate recovery and prevent this form of violence against women in the future.”

Indigenous women in the department of Cauca, meanwhile, spoke about how, in addition to sexual violence by armed actors, they experienced it from authorities who were supposed to protect them. The project arranged for psychologists to offer follow-up support to the participating women.

Regional research on rural development led by RIMISP, an IDRC grantee based in Chile, has also had an impact on the peace negotiations. An important part of this contribution is the idea of rural development building on an area’s strengths: improving infrastructure, helping producers access markets in nearby small cities, and supporting decentralization and coordination among local institutions.

Colombia after the accord

Once an agreement between the government and the FARC is signed, says Gottsbacher, the challenge will be for the guerrilla group to demobilize and the government to help transform illicit economies into legitimate ones.

An IDRC-supported project aims to reduce violence by understanding the illegal economies operating in border regions of eight Latin American countries, including Colombia. Led by the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences in Ecuador, it is studying the links between local institutional weaknesses, illegal activity, and organized crime.

Peace implementation involves actors beyond the government and armed groups, explains Federico Burone, director of IDRC's Latin America and Caribbean office. "Every actor has a connection with other groups that foster violence. International actors are also involved, requiring the enforcement of international law. This research is helping authorities to inform and better assess the role of regional tribunals that could be part of the solution."

Post-accord agenda and development

IDRC and Bogota's Universidad de los Andes co-hosted a well-attended one-day conference in March 2016 that centered around rebuilding communities, promoting justice, recovering economically, and further establishing democracy.

"Many of the causes that led to this conflict haven't been sufficiently resolved, such as the social inequalities, concentration of land ownership, and who controls access to markets and natural resources," Gottsbacher says.

"The conference gave us an agenda for what remains to be done," Burone notes. "There is a new context in which the work of researchers should play a critical role." There is also a clear call for national authorities in Colombia to take over and more actively participate in initiatives previously managed by external donors, Burone explains.

At another March 2016 conference, attendees also learned of an IDRC-supported project that surveyed men and women about their attitudes and coping strategies in areas under the control of armed groups. The findings will help design policies and programs to build lasting peace.

IDRC-sponsored research is also examining how to improve the participation and rights of women in the reparations and victims processes in post-conflict Colombia.

"It builds on earlier research that looked at how different women's groups helped the courts be better attuned to women's perspectives when determining reparations," said Adrian Di Giovanni, senior program officer at IDRC.

Although it may not always address armed conflict directly, other IDRC-supported research in Colombia stands to contribute to the implementation of the peace process by improving living conditions in distant populations. The knowledge and solutions generated by the study of climate change and how to control the spread of diseases such as dengue fever and the Zika virus will help to ensure prosperity for vulnerable populations.

"This work is helping Colombian communities to protect ecosystems and reduce the burden of these diseases," Burone says.

Research on agriculture, which includes scaling up more nutritious disease-resistant yellow potato varieties, will improve the livelihood of farmers and food security in rural communities.

Looking back, Gottsbacher is proud of what IDRC's partners have achieved. "It's not just research for the sake of research." How it contributes to social change is key for him.

"For 15 years, we have been looking at violence, conflict, crime, victims rights, transitional justice, and democratization. The government and society acknowledge our work."