Back on their own two feet
Decades of conflict between the Colombian Government and guerrillas have left many traumatised. A project is giving displaced people a future.

Forced to flee, traumatised, victimised
For more than five decades, Colombia has been gripped by armed conflict. Even the 2016 peace accord between the FARC guerrilla group and the Colombian Government will not bring comprehensive peace to the country, as not all Colombian guerrilla organisations have signed up to it. The conflict’s root causes persist. Land disputes, inadequate access to natural resources and human rights abuses have cost more than 220,000 people their lives. Around a million have been murdered, abducted or subjected to forced disappearance, torture and rape. Almost six million Colombians have become internally displaced persons (IDPs). Robbed of their livelihoods, they have settled on the outskirts of big cities. Most of these slum areas have little, if any, access to public services of any kind. Very few people receive appropriate psychosocial support to help them deal with the often traumatic experiences they have had, and they often lack the confidence to find new employment. Many IDPs end up as street vendors or in casual work on the informal labour market. Most also have no access to the start-up capital that would enable them to set up a microbusiness. There is very little provision for this group, and the support that is available is only short-term. As a result, IDPs find it much more difficult than other Colombians to find employment that will earn them a living. The Colombian Government intends to use the peace process to make it easier for this group, and other disadvantaged groups, to access regular employment.

Paving the way out of poverty
PROINTEGRA is a project commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) to stabilise the economic situation of internally displaced persons and host communities in the Norte de Santander region. About 190,000 IDPs live in this north-eastern region of Colombia near the border with Venezuela, more than 60 per cent of them in poverty. As the project’s implementing organisation, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH supports state and non-state
partners from Colombia in tailoring their provision of support for IDPs more effectively to this target group. For example, they have worked together to overhaul existing psychosocial support programmes and have developed measures to promote microbusinesses. PROINTEGRA is also advising municipal and urban councils on how currently illegal settlements can be put on a legal footing. Such measures improve the access of people living in slum areas to public services.

The project is also working with regional and municipal authorities, as well as with the Unit for Comprehensive Care and Re-paration to Victims (UARIV), to support returning or resettled IDPs with establishing a living in rural regions and resuming agricultural production. It is identifying innovative solutions from across the regions and feeding them into policy advice. This promotes good practice at other levels of government and allows it to be disseminated.

**Citizen-centred services**

During the first three months of the project, 40 internally displaced persons received support to enable them to set up a microbusiness. These individuals now earn more, improving the situation of over 200 family members. Taking part in a two-month training course run by the project has also enabled 116 IDPs to gain additional skills in construction, greatly enhancing their chances of finding employment in this rapidly expanding sector.

The project began by creating a working relationship based on trust as the foundation for cooperation with state and non-state institutions in Colombia. GIZ advisors are training partner institutions to provide better citizen-centred services. The shared aim is to tailor existing support to the actual needs of target groups. This will ensure that in the long term, IDPs living in poverty and members of host communities have improved opportunities for earning a living. Ultimately it will promote both economic independence and social cohesion.

Myriam Gómez had to leave her home when she was threatened by guerrillas. Her family’s situation was precarious, and she suffered kidney problems, so in 2006, Myriam Gómez received short-term food support from the Red Cross. She was unable to find employment and earned a living by smuggling small quantities of beer into Colombia from Venezuela – until the border closed. PROINTEGRA has supported Myriam Gómez with setting up a small stationery shop offering a copying service.

Now Myriam Gómez is much more confident about the future: ‘Having the shop has substantially boosted my family income. I use the profits to buy the medicines I need. The whole family works together, with everyone playing their part. It keeps us together and also helps us come to terms with what we have been through.’ Myriam Gómez is delighted at the change in her life, and she’s now using her story to help other women find ways of earning a living. PROINTEGRA continues to advise her on managing her shop.

The project is part of BMZ’s special initiative ‘Tackling the Root Causes of Displacement, Reintegrating Refugees’, which provides short-term support to refugees and their host communities. In the long term, sustainable measures are designed to eliminate the structural causes of displacement, such as social inequality and food insecurity. This particular project contributes to the integration, reintegration and social development of internally displaced persons and returnees in Colombia.