

Promoting sustainable rural economic development

Income and employment in rural areas – a contribution to peacebuilding and the sustainable use of natural resources

Context

The agricultural sector in Colombia benefits from a very favourable climate and vast expanses of arable land. However, farmers use much of this land exclusively for grazing, while other areas are underused or even lie fallow.

Rural areas in Colombia are largely cut off from the country's strong economic development. As service and marketing centres, urban economies could generate considerable impetus for the development of rural areas. However, local and regional markets are barely developed.

Generally speaking, small-scale producers are poorly organised and are rarely integrated into economic cycles. They are unable to satisfy the local and regional demand of potential markets, and for this reason prospective customers often do not even attempt to purchase regional products.

There is, nevertheless, a lot of potential for change in this area. The aim of policy-makers is to pursue 'rural development based on a territorial approach', which means taking into account the different sectors that affect rural development and drive it forward. In addition to crop and livestock farming, these include raw materials management, tourism, skilled manual trades and environmental protection. The project is designed to foster ties with urban areas, with rural development tailored to take place first and foremost in rural areas themselves.

Dynamic medium-sized towns offer excellent opportunities for the sale of regional products, with organic products providing great potential too. Organic food stores already exist in larger cities, for instance. Although the amount of organic produce grown in the various remote locations around the country is small, all of it is sold to these stores.

An 'integrated agricultural development policy' is one of the key elements of the peace agreement signed in late 2016 between the government and the guerrilla group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). This underlines the importance of the topic as a contributing factor in establishing lasting peace in the country. Colombia now faces huge challenges as it moves on to implementing the agreement, and job creation is seen as crucial to the success of this phase of the peace process.

Objective

The objective of the project is as follows: Model approaches for inclusive and sustainable economic development that are relevant to the national dialogue are implemented in selected economic areas.

Approach

Alliances between local, regional and national stakeholders in the Meta, Norte de Santander and Caquetá departments use specific examples to show what green and inclusive economic development in rural areas can achieve. They demonstrate how income and employment opportunities for poor sections of the population can improve while simultaneously conserving natural resources. Examples include farmers' markets as a way to directly market products, alternative production methods in buffer zones of natural parks, local



From left to right: Developing new centres of sustainable tourism in Meta department; young people working in a blackberry cooperative – two alliances that are supported by PRODES.

ecotourism initiatives and sustainable livestock and fish farming. Armed conflicts, as well as those of a political, social and environmental nature, are rife in all three departments. The project builds trust between the different stakeholders and thereby defuses potential conflicts. This creates new local and regional business models and markets based on environmental sustainability, which in turn benefit the poor rural population.

Representatives of the National Planning Department, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Tourism, the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, including its 'green business' unit, as well as the Colombian Presidential Agency for International Cooperation all work closely together on the ground, thus allowing lessons learned to be incorporated into policy-making.

In the communities themselves, the project team works with the responsible officers from local and regional government and administrative bodies, the regional offices of the national training service, Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje (SENA), the Colombian agricultural institute, Instituto Colombiano Agropecuario (ICA), and regional environmental agencies as well as with the organisations of producers themselves who have grouped together to form associations and cooperatives.

Other partners in the alliances include the private sector and its institutions as well as universities and civil society organisations focusing on rural development and production.

This approach ensures that the specific models that have been developed jointly are disseminated broadly both by government as well as the private sector – not only in other communities within the project regions but also in other parts of the country. By opening up new tourist destinations that create new jobs and opportunities to make a living, it also helps to implement the peace agreement in those regions worst affected by the conflict.

Results

The public project partners, the national training service SENA as well as the Colombian agricultural institute ICA, that previously had little or no presence in the regions, now advise local producers. A welcome side-effect of this is that the local population is once again beginning to place more trust in national authorities.

In cooperation with regional environmental authorities, the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development has set up a 'green window' that advises local businesses on the implementation of their green business ideas. This is a prime example of how the project helps national programmes to expand their reach to different regions.

The income and job situation has also improved. Dairy farmers are earning more for their milk thanks to a new collection point equipped with a cooling system that improves quality. Many fruit and vegetable farmers have obtained qualifications in 'good agricultural practice'. As well as allowing them to charge more for their produce, this means they can supply regional buyers on a long-term basis. Jobs in the initial stages of processing mainly attract young people, for whom they offer a possible route to a future career. New markets have also been developed. Producers in the buffer zone of the Páramo Santurban nature park, for example, have identified new opportunities and begun adding value to their products. They now sell delicious antipasti in environmentally friendly packaging.

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	administrations, regional chambers of commerce and others
Project area	Meta, Norte de Santander and Caquetá departments as well as national level

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