

Empowering rural communities and internally displaced persons in conflict-ridden regions

Context

Colombia has been gripped by armed conflict for over 50 years, a conflict that revolves essentially around the country's natural resources. Further, the Colombian Government's economic model relies on agro-industrial production and commodity exports. The armed conflict, coca cultivation, huge monocultures for biofuel production as well as mining projects are all jeopardizing the livelihoods of rural communities and leading to violent evictions of indigenous smallholder families. Many of them find it almost impossible to grow enough food and earn an income. They are migrating to the cities in search of a better life.

Yet another problem is the destruction of ecosystems by forest clearance and the use of pesticides, which endanger public goods such as water, land, the biodiversity and forests. This situation is compounded by severe droughts and flooding, which are being triggered by climate change.

Some smallholder families, women and young people have organized themselves in order to protect their resources. Their local roots are strong and they want to remain where they are. But the civilian population gets drawn into the conflict owing to the heavy military presence in daily life and the demands of the armed fighters. The consequences are serious human rights violations such as violence, poverty, hunger, displacement, as well as the destruction of the social fabric and traditional values.

Yet in 2016, after more than 50 years of armed strife between government forces, guerrillas and paramilitaries, a peace agreement was signed between the Government and the FARC guerrillas. A peace agreement alone is no guarantee of lasting peace, however. The agreement must be implemented and outstanding matters settled. A system of transitional justice as well as long-term conflict transformation are needed at various levels, for example.





HEKS/EPER has been working in Colombia since the 1980s and has extensive experience in supporting internally displaced people, setting up and consolidating grassroots organizations, as well as in promoting human rights and peace-building.

Objectives, priorities, activities

Geographically, the Country Programme is concentrated in the Santanderes region, the departments of Santander and Norte de Santander, as well as the Magdalena Medio region. This project region in the northeast of the country lies between the two Andean mountain ranges and the Magdalena River. The thematic priorities are the development of rural communities, as well as peace-building and conflict management. The programme aims to help create a more just and peaceful society and improve the livelihoods of rural communities – through the following measures:

- Setting up and strengthening self-help organizations of internally displaced people, small farmers' organizations, women's organizations and youth organizations.
- creation and strengthening of local and regional networks of social organizations.
- promoting small-scale organic farming and income-generating projects for women.
- promoting access to land and resources as well as the rights of small farmers.
- promoting agro-ecological production and the biodiversity.
- building up value chains and market access.
- awareness-building and claiming the right to food, land and territory.
- networking and lobbying around priority topics of the Country Programme such as land-grabbing, traditional seeds and the rights of small farmers.
- supporting peace initiatives and contributing to the implementation of the peace agreement.
- advocacy on behalf of people at local, regional, national and international levels.

Target groups

The following groups are direct beneficiaries under the Country Programme:

- Smallholder families engaged in traditional agriculture. Most families already follow agro-ecological production approaches and are engaged in activities to protect natural resources.
- Internally displaced families from other parts of Colombia who have settled in Santanderes over the past 50 years. They need special support by virtue of their uprooting, their stigmatization and their limited access to land.
- Women, who are especially encouraged to participate in projects so as to meet their immediate needs and help change the power structures between the genders. This is achieved by empowering women in their own families and expanding their role in community organizational structures.
- Young people, whose inclusion is paramount given the major problem posed by the rural-urban drift. Encouraging young people and sensitizing them to



organic farming, biodiversity conservation and access to natural resources are guarantees of the sustainability of project and programme work.

Partnerships, networks, alliances, memberships

HEKS/EPER collaborates with other relief agencies and institutions on the ground and is one of the organizations sponsoring the joint peace-building programme of Swiss relief organizations, human rights organizations and the Swiss Federal Government. Among the partner organizations are local grassroots and human rights organizations, rural communities, and church and social NGOs. They include organizations that have been cooperating with HEKS for many years, as well as new organizations in the Santanderes region specializing in traditional seeds, food sovereignty, biodiversity conservation and the promotion of the rights of smallholders. Furthermore, these organizations are in turn supported by specialized organizations that work directly with one or more HEKS/EPER partner organizations in order to reinforce them technically and advise and support them in lobbying processes nationally and internationally.

HEKS/EPER on the ground

HEKS/EPER maintains a Coordination Office in Colombia staffed by local recruits who implement the Country Programme and offer professional advice to partner organizations and expert guidance for projects.

Topics and working approach

HEKS/EPER takes a participatory approach to its work. Target groups and partner organizations are included in project planning, implementation and evaluation from the beginning. Support for women and young people is one of the main causes championed by HEKS/EPER. We also continually monitor the evolution of the armed conflict and the human rights situation and work for lasting peace and the safety of the civilians.

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Colombia

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