

TZH15 - Colombia: Land rights, agriculture and the quest for peace

[Sandra] Hello and welcome to Target: Zero Hunger – a podcast that explores the food challenges and solutions of our time, brought to you by the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization. I’m your host, Sandra Ferrari.

[Theme music in]

[Juan Santos/Voice over CLIP IN]

We are leaving behind the last armed conflict in the western hemisphere. We are leaving behind decades of conflict, which has bloodied us.

We come from a land of immense potential, but it is underutilized precisely because of conflict. And today I am coming here to reaffirm our will to work hand and hand, and to build peace in the countryside

We stand ready to realize our potential as much as possible and to ensure that the Colombian countryside is the bread basket that the world needs to combat malnutrition and hunger beyond its borders.

[Juan Santos/Voice over CLIP OUT]

[Theme music out]

[Morroa Birds chirping sfx IN]

[Sandra] The voice you just heard is Juan Manuel Santos, the president of Colombia. He came to FAO last December when his government had just signed a peace accord with rebels after five decades of civil conflict.

But the hard work of rebuilding the country is just beginning. And agriculture is a big part of that.

Colombia is one of seven countries in that world that has the greatest capacity to expand its agriculture. But of the 26 million hectares of land that could be used for agriculture and reforestation, Colombia is using only a little over 7 million hectares.

Over the years, more than 220,000 Colombian’s died in the conflict and it uprooted the lives of over eight million people. Many of those who were caught in the collateral damage of the war were displaced from their homes and lands.

In this episode, we are going to explore how farming and land rights are tied into the country’s quest for sustainable peace.

[Morroa Birds chirping sfx OUT]

[Low music from the festival in the background Fade up]

[Sandra] We are in Sucre. It is one of five districts in Northern Colombia that have been part of a rural development program that the government is leading to revitalize the local economy. Sweden

is funding the program and FAO is helping with advice on how the government can use agriculture to build new futures for its people.

[Festival music continue as bed]

[Sandra] You're hearing sounds of celebration as the people of Morroa mark the end of a three-year project to help the community get back on its feet.

Years of conflict between the government and the rebel group FARC had ravaged these rural areas. It crippled the lives of people living in communities like Morroa. It also meant the country wasn't developing and producing in as it could have.

But the country has entered a period of rebirth.

This project is one of many that started 6 years ago. At the time, the government had just entered peace negotiations with the rebels.

FAO's Nadya Gonzalez went to this region to speak to some of the people who were part of the project. Orlando Ruiz Mendes was one of them. His family suffered great loss at the hands of the FARC.

[Orlando/Davelis CLIP – VO MIX IN]

[Orlando] After they killed my dad, after the wake and the funeral, my mother and my brother, who all lived here, left. My family and I, my wife and children, had to live here in this house, where he was murdered. Eventually it was hard to leave because I was deeply attached to my land, my friends and everything.

[Sandra] Orlando was targeted by the guerrilla. They forced him to take a job working for a wealthy man in Sincelejo. Orlando was not comfortable with the situation, but knew that if he didn't do the job he would be killed.

[Orlando] I knew what happened to my dad so I got together with my mother and my brother, I told them what was going on, and I told my mom: "I am leaving." That was hard. As we say, land is everything to a farmer and taking such a decision has been cruel.

[Nadya] And where did you go Don Orlando?

[Sandra] Nadya is asking Orlando where he went next.

[Orlando] I went to "Los Palmitos". I moved in 2002 and in 2003 I had to sell my plots. Imagine four million for three hectares of land. That was a real gift. I never came back here in 12 years.

[Sandra] The damage of the 52-year conflict is extensive and many have fallen victim to it in different ways. The pains Orlando and his family went through were sadly common for people during this time.

When it came to land ownership, the legal lines were blurred. Possession didn't necessarily mean ownership. As more people were forced to leave their land, others took their place – sometimes paying money for it and sometimes they just occupied it and claimed it as their own. And

sometimes, like in Orlando's case, people had to flee so quickly that the money they got was far, far below the value of the land.

After Orlando left his land, for instance, Davelis del Carmen Borja came to the area in search of land her own land to farm on.

[Davelis] I came to this place because I worked with one of my uncles in his company. He was the person who used to help me out. As we did not have land, he found us a plot, and I was a renter for five years. This is why I came to this place. After five years, the owner offered to sell it to me and we negotiated.

[Sandra] What Davelis didn't know was that the property had been purchased at a very low price from a person who was a victim of threats by illegal armed groups. Orlando sold his land for four million pesos. That land was later sold to Davelis for 44 million. Both were taken advantage of.

[Orlando] My friends who stayed here told me that the guy sold the plots, about a year and a half after buying them from me. Therefore, when they had their lands expropriated by the land restitution service, one of those plots was mine.

[Sandra] The government has recognized situations similar to that of Orlando's. In June 2011, President Santos instituted a "Land restitution law", commonly known as the Victims Law. It aimed to return stolen or abandoned land to displaced Colombians.

The law was well-intentioned. But the attempt at restitution had unintended effects for people like Davelis – people who thought they had legally purchased land from a legitimate landowner.

[Davelis] When the law of land restitution came out, I was glad because I said: "Good, there have been many victims in this country. This will finally bring justice". However, I never imagined that this law would apply to the property that I bought.

[Sandra] Because the FARC had controlled these rural areas for so long, the government didn't have a strong presence here and wasn't around to monitor well. And Davelis –without knowing it– became a victim of this.

[Davelis] At first, I opposed the court, but when the sentence came I didn't put up any resistance because I had to obey the law and we returned the property to the persons: Mr. Orlando Ruiz and Pedro Lopez. And from there began a series of negotiations and with the State through the Association of Famers of Sucre. We explained to the state that the law, which had been designed to take the land back from these groups of outlaws who forcibly removed lands from famers, was not our situation.

[Orlando] I always said that this is not easy because that woman must be feeling hurt, offended, and it is normal, as I told her once. We cannot have any hard feelings for each other, since none of us decided that.

[Davelis] We tried to explain to government to recognize the horrible damage that this law did to our family and 44 similar cases in Sucre that resulted in no compensation.

[Orlando/Davelis CLIP – VO MIX OUT]

[Sound bed IN]

[Sandra] Davelis had another plot in the area and today she and Orlando are neighbours. They are even working together in a farmers' association, called Apacambi, that helps returnees, like Orlando, re-learn farming skills.

More about that in a minute.

But Davelis' story also illustrates how much there is a need in Colombia for big reform beyond just this one law – reform that looks at how the country can distribute land fairly ...and in a smart way, to make sure farmers in rural areas can grow food and build stable lives.

Since the victims of the conflict were mostly from rural areas, focusing on developing those areas will make the country as a whole more stable and stronger.

[Sound bed OUT]

[Minister Pardo VO MIX IN]

[Pardo] We know that peace is not something we can only rely on the signing of a piece of paper. That is important, but the most important thing about these agreements is that they are comprehensive.

[Sandra] This is Colombia's minister of post-conflict Rafael Pardo, speaking at FAO headquarters in Rome. He's talking about Comprehensive Rural Reform – or CRR for short. It's part of the peace agreement.

[Pardo] They are not simply agreements that call for the demobilization of a group or their disarmament. Rather, these are comprehensive agreements, which seek to completely transform the reality of the rural environments of Colombia, which have been the stage for all of these conflicts over the past five decades.

[Minister Pardo VO MIX OUT]

[Sandra] This means creating jobs in rural areas, providing training for farmers, and building things like infrastructure so farmers can get their products to the city markets. It also means reintegrating members of FARC in civilian society and helping them build a stable livelihood. Giving them land to farm is one way of doing that.

And then there's the returnees, like Orlando, and those like Davelis – victims of the war who are eager to pick up their farming lives again and boost their production. Here's where Apacambi comes in.

[Davelis VO MIX IN]

[Nadya] Tell me about Apacambi.

[Davelis] Well, Apacambi started when the persons who had been restored their lands came back after 12 or 15 years of being away, during conflict. They had lost their interest and know-how in farming. Then FAO and SENA [the National Service of Learning, Colombia], and the land restitution unit gave them the support they needed.

[Nadya] Are there many women?

[Davelis] Yes, there is a group of 30 women. We are working with vegetables and hens. Now with SENA we are working with fisheries.

[Nadya] And how has this project helped you as a collective of women?

[Davelis] It has helped us strengthen our bonds of friendship and it has helped us to learn to work in a group, to learn to share the losses and profits, and that each day the contribution of each person will continue to grow. And it does not stop there. The project is sustainable and it grows every day.

[Davelis VO MIX OUT]

[Mujeres Clips VO MIX IN]

[Sandra] And growing food is the backbone of lasting peace. Here are Lacy Liz Alvarez and Cirler Ruiz. Also with Apacambi.

[Lacy] The link between peace and food security is that if we are able to generate income for households' access to food, then we would not have to ask our neighbors for anything and we would avoid creating any type of violence.

[Cirler] Well, I would say the same. Having a livelihood support, I think that people will not have to do bad things such as stealing or killing for money. Because there is no need to do so as they have their own resources. T

hose are the reasons in many cases, people do not have any support, they do not know how to survive and that's why they turn to doing bad things, which is the easiest way.

[Mujeres Clips VO MIX OUT]

[Villarreal interview IN]

[Marcela] We're talking about a massive initiative basically on rural development, but what does this mean? The whole face of Colombia's rural areas are going to change under these peace agreements.

[Sandra] This is Marcela Villarreal talking about what needs to happen to make Colombia's rural reform program work. She's Director of FAO's Partnerships and South-South Cooperation Division.

[Marcela] Of course, it cannot happen overnight. They have calculated that this program is up for 15 years. They have calculated a cost of 42 billion dollars, but over 15 years. So all in all that it's not a very expensive program, but it is a very intensive program and also there's a part of it that has to happen immediately and that's going quite fast. So first step is, of course, to disarm people, to take people out of their armed activities. And that is happening. Now what is going to happen with them, what are they opportunities that are going to be given to them especially for the rural people to be able to restore their livelihoods?

[Sandra] But the country ready for such an overhaul in policy? It seems quite ambitious. What your take is on that?

[Marcela] It's very ambitious. But necessarily ambitious. So this is one of the main points for us, for

FAO to provide the support. This really brings us to do the best we can in terms of working together. And I should say that we have an internal coordination mechanism that has some thirty professionals both at headquarters and in the regional office, and FAO Colombia also. So bring together all of our best thinking and all our most innovative ideas in terms of how we can support in a meaningful way. One main aspect of the peace agreement, is its institutionality for rural areas.... Having weak rural governance, this is why the FARC flourished in the rural areas.

[Sandra] So what has the government done to address that fundamental need for structure in these rural areas, outside of land restitution agency that had already created in 2011?

[Marcela] So they have created the national land agency, the rural development agency, the agency for the renovation of the territory. And we are helping all of these agencies in terms of capacity development, institutional development, strengthening them, helping them to be strong institutions, so that they can be effective in terms of implementing all of the aspects of the agreement.

[Sandra] What else is FAO doing to support this capacity building?

[Marcela] We're working also with them, for example, using the voluntary guidelines.

[Sandra] What are the voluntary guidelines?

[Marcela] So, the voluntary guidelines for the responsible tenure of land, fisheries and forestry. This is an instrument that was approved, negotiated and approved, by the Committee of World Food Security with the participation of the different actors - governments, and also civil society and also private sector.

[Sandra] So, in effect, they are guidelines for governments to use to make sure they are taking all needs of all stakeholders and beneficiaries into account while redesigning their policies.

[Marcela] That's right, we're working also with them, using the voluntary guidelines to strengthen their capacities to organize, especially at the farmers level. Strong farmers' organizations including the cooperatives are fundamental towards rural development, but they're also fundamental because they make societies resilient to shocks - including conflict. We're using south-south cooperation to have farmer organizations help Colombian farmers organizations, organize themselves. We have cooperative incubators, for example- how cooperatives are born, how they are nourished, how we ensure that they are equal within themselves so that they have everybody's voices - women's voices, men's voices, youth voices. So we're helping to support this reconstruction of the social tissue.

[Sandra] In terms of social issues there are also parts of the rural population like indigenous groups that have been victim of the conflict, but have added needs as a particular vulnerable populations. How is FAO helping there?

[Marcela] So, we're putting up social dialogue platforms, including in the forest areas, including the national parks. And then, with a very important focus on two groups of people, two populations which are the indigenous peoples, whose rights were very much affected during the conflict. The ancestral lands of indigenous peoples, they were overtaken by armed groups. And also the communities of afro-decedents or Afro-Colombian communities. So, we're working very closely with these two communities to ensure that they can have secure tenure rights and also that their lands are restituted. And for this we're working with one of the new agencies that has been created - which is the land restitution agency.

Here FAO plays a very important role because they are our partners. We listen to them, they listen to us. We've been collaborating over the years. We have very concrete partnership agreements with La Via Campesina and their national representatives, Fensuagro, and others. So, FAO has the credibility with these actors, and FAO obviously - being an intergovernmental organization - we have the credibility of the government. The credibility between the social movements, farmers' movements and the government is not always there, especially because of the conflict, but we are bringing the actors together. Part of the sustainability of the peace process is that these actors have strategic dialogue among themselves. That they get together, they sit down together and address the problems in a way of finding a solution and implementing a solution.

[Sandra] What is FAO's role going forward, not just with the government but with all actors involved?

[Marcela] From FAO perspective, we're there to support them no matter what the government change is. They have elections next year. But we will be there for the next 15 years. From the very beginning the FAO local office had a very strong role in the whole process. We were called because, of course, we are the agency of the United Nations that looks at rural development, rural areas and agriculture food security. So, these are central elements of the peace process and the peace agreement.

The big work comes now to ensure that the ground is set, the foundations are set, so that this peace is going to be lasting.

[Villarreal interview OUT]

[Sandra] Back in Sucre, Colombia – the impacts of the greater “objectives and methods” laid out at policy level are much more tangible.

Former Swedish ambassador to Colombia, Marie Andersson de Frutos.

[Former Swedish Ambassador Interview IN]

[Frutos] I think what we are doing here today is just a witness of the fantastic collaboration we have had and the big impact that FAO has had in these people's lives.

[Nadya] Tell me a little you thoughts about the outcomes of this project.

[Frutos] Our intention was that these people - when they come back and have got the sentence and have been given their deeds - that they should be able to go back and become productive. And this is what we have seen today. We have seen women's associations where they do all different kinds of products so they can sell at market, but also how the men have showed us how they plan for the future. I think it was really interesting to see how with Swedish financing, FAO initiated these big dams with drain water and have done all the studies - environmental studies and so on - and now this will change the life of these people when they will be able to count on water and irrigation. Also, of course, techniques on how to milk the cows will be interesting. It's just starting, but I can see this will be something great in the future. So, perhaps not so big inputs, but it will have big implications.

[Former Swedish Ambassador Interview OUT]

[Theme Music IN]

[Sandra] With international help, the Colombian Government is embarking on perhaps its most ambitious project yet: making peace last.

And in this fragile period, agriculture is more important than ever.

The spotlight in the coming years will decidedly be on rural areas-the countryside- where displaced communities are coming back to reconnect with ancestral lands, former fighters will build new lives as farmers and the dream of building strong, productive communities that will make Colombia the breadbasket of the world, will hinge on helping them succeed.

[Pause]

A very special thanks to Nadya Gonzalez and FAO's office in Colombia for supporting the production of this podcast.

If you have any questions or feedback for us please write to FAO-audio@fao.org.
I am Sandra Ferrari. Thanks for listening.

[Theme music OUT]

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